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The battle analysis methodology as promulgated by the Combat Studies Institute at the United States Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, established the guidelines for the study. Both Western and Soviet sources were utilized. Objectivity and comparability of all available source material were of paramount importance in establishing validity and accuracy of various accounts.

The study concludes the Soviets prepared superbly for the operational battle; however, execution fell short of expectations. Because this was the first time the Soviets used tank armies in battle, an analysis of Kursk serves as an excellent catalyst for subsequent examination of present Soviet defensive doctrine and the use of tank armies in defense.

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AN OPERATIONAL LEVEL ANALYSIS OF SOVIET ARMORED  
FORMATIONS IN THE DELIBERATE DEFENSE IN THE BATTLE  
OF KURSK, 1943

A thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army  
Command and General Staff College in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

by

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## ABSTRACT

AN OPERATIONAL LEVEL ANALYSIS OF SOVIET ARMORED FORMATIONS IN THE DELIBERATE DEFENSE IN THE BATTLE OF KURSK, 1943

Major Charles L. Crow, USA, 135 pages

This study is an historical analysis of the Soviet operational use of tank and mechanized corps, and tank armies, in the deliberate defense at the Battle of Kursk in 1943. It centers on the question of how effective was the Red Army in employing these units during this momentous battle. Events that shaped the battle and a brief comparison of forces set the stage. A discussion of the actual battle on the Central and Voronezh Fronts is followed by an analysis of the effectiveness of the employment of the operational armored units.

The battle analysis methodology as promulgated by the Combat Studies Institute at the United States Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, established the guidelines for the study. Both Western and Soviet sources were utilized. Objectivity and compatability of all available source material were of paramount importance in establishing the validity and accuracy of various accounts.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

On 5 July 1943, "Operation Citadel," one of the greatest battles in history, was heralded by the opening salvo of thousands of guns on the Eastern Front in Russia. Hitler had staked the majority of his elite panzer forces on a bid to regain the strategic initiative over the Soviet Union. This battle was to be a "beacon for the whole world"<sup>1</sup> of the might of the German Wehrmacht; at the same time, Hitler expected to reverse the string of recent German defeats in the east. For his part, Stalin sought to inflict yet another defeat upon the hated German invaders. Based on detailed information supplied from a well-placed source in the German High Command, the Soviets prepared the most elaborate defense in history in the Kursk salient. Following two weeks of battle, the pride of the Wehrmacht and the Third Reich lay decimated on the fields of Mother Russia. The once elite panzer forces, victors over Poland, France, the Balkans, and the initial strike into the Soviet Union, lay in ruin, defeated by the "Bolshevik hordes."

Over two and a quarter million soldiers, six thousand tanks and assault guns, five thousand aircraft and thirty thousand pieces of artillery clashed in what many classify as the death knell of the German forces in the crusade against communism in the east.<sup>2</sup> The Battle of Moscow in December 1941 had demonstrated to the world that the German war machine was not invincible. The Battle of Stalingrad in early 1943 had truly stunned the Germans and had inflicted casualties

of staggering proportions on the Wehrmacht. Kursk and the subsequent Soviet offensives insured Soviet victory in the East. The Red Army seized the strategic initiative in July 1943 and never relinquished it. From this time forward, it was the Germans who were forced to react to Soviet initiatives until final defeat in the ruins of Berlin in May 1945.

Although Kursk has been the subject of numerous studies, we have not exhausted all avenues of investigation of this colossal battle. The staggering magnitude of the Battle of Kursk almost defies the imagination both in numbers of personnel and equipment committed and in results attained when viewed in context. Despite this, there is an appalling lack of knowledge concerning this battle in the west, particularly in the United States Army. The Soviets feel that this battle was the turning point of the war and they harbor deep resentment at the seeming downgrading of this feat of Soviet arms.<sup>3</sup> Kursk offers a multitude of opportunities for study, but one of the most intriguing is the Soviet use of their armored troops. Without discrediting the Soviet infantryman, who covered himself with glory in the battle, it was the armored and mechanized units that struggled and triumphed over the German panzers in the July heat at Kursk in 1943. These were the formations forged in battle the preceeding two years against the German Wehrmacht. Now, battle hardened and flushed with victory from Stalingrad, these tankers and mechanized infantry defied Hitler's finest and overcame tremendous odds.

Soviet operational employment of armored and mechanized forces throughout the war was part of an evolutionary process. Prior to the

German invasion, Soviet military thought had been the catalyst for the development of armored and mechanized corps. When large mechanized and armored units were employed in Spain during the Spanish Civil War, the wrong conclusions were drawn, and the corps organization was dropped in favor of separate armored brigades. German successes, combined with the experience of the Soviet-Finnish war, forced the Soviets to realize that armored and mechanized corps were not only viable, but necessary. Massed armor was to dominate the field of battle.

Unfortunately, the German invasion caught the Red Army in the midst of a reorganization process. Based on an analysis of German successes in France and as a result of comprehensive wargames finished in January 1941, twenty-nine mechanized corps were to be established.<sup>4</sup> However, lack of equipment, poor command and control capabilities, and inexperienced leadership, in conjunction with unproven doctrine, contributed to the initial failure of these formations. By mid-July 1941, the mechanized corps had been abolished and replaced, by and large, with separate armored brigades. By 1942, tank and mechanized corps were in use again. During this stage of the war, the Red Army had proven itself a deadly adversary. Its armored and mechanized units had begun to assume a definitive form; and, despite faulty employment, these units were becoming a major influence on the battlefield.

Toward the end of what the Soviets refer to as "phase II" of the Great Patriotic War, November 1942 to December 1943, the Red Army began forming tank armies. The Soviets had an effective doctrine for employing corps level units, but the method of employment of the new

tank armies was still in the infant stage. The Battle of Kursk was to give the Red Army ample experience in employing large armored forces in a deliberate defense against blitzkrieg style tactics.<sup>5</sup>

This thesis proposes to conduct an operational-level analysis of Soviet armored formations in the deliberate defense during the Battle of Kursk in 1943. Because the battle effectively took place on two distinct fronts, this study will evaluate the use of armored forces in two dissimilar situations. On the northern face of the salient, the German attack was conventional, with infantry preceding the panzers to make a penetration for exploitation by massed armor. In the south, The German commander, Erich von Manstein, employed different tactics. Because of a severe shortage of infantry, the German assault here opened with a massive use of panzers in the first wave in an effort to seek a quick penetration.

How effective was the Red Army in using its new strength in the deliberate defense? Obviously, the Soviets were the victors in the Battle of Kursk; but did their victory stem from an overwhelming superiority in men and equipment as the Germans suggest, or was it simply a triumph of doctrine as the Soviets insist?<sup>6</sup> How did the Red Army operationally employ its armored units in the battle? The present study seeks to address these and other questions, many of which retain relevances to operational discussions even today.

This problem is significant because the emphasis today is on large mechanized armies, poised to strike an opponent with overwhelming force at the point of decision. Since the initiative lies with the attacker, it is incumbent upon the defender to dispose and maneuver his

forces from locations where they can respond to the enemy advances, and seize the initiative should the situation arise. When analyzing the operational level of war, this becomes an immensely difficult task. Commanders and staffs at corps level and higher must be able to analyze a situation, determine enemy intentions and formulate plans, and commit forces twenty-four to seventy-two hours in advance of actual combat. Expertise in this comes either through experience or by close examination of past battles. There is no magical formula; however, historical study affords a context for understanding of the principles of war and the rationale for making decisions. Kursk, a classical battle of deliberate defense supported by mobile reserves, provides insight not only into the Soviet art of war, but an understanding of the problems associated with the operational level of war.

The method of research employed will be historical. The battle analysis methodology as promulgated by the Combat Studies Institute at the United States Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, will establish the ground rules. This allows a thorough study of the battle from both German and Soviet perspectives. At the same time, the format is flexible enough to allow modification to emphasize pertinent data found to be most significant. Chapter One is a brief introduction into the problem and its historical significance. It surveys available literature used in the study, and expands on the methodology. This chapter also addresses pertinent information concerning limitations, terminology and surveys research questions to be addressed in the study.

Chapter Two covers the strategic setting and events leading to the battle. Numerous events prior to the battle influenced its outcome: the world strategic situation, recent Soviet victories at Stalingrad and subsequent offensives, the decline of Hitler's panzer forces, and the rise of Soviet military prowess. The majority of research questions will be answered in this chapter. To analyze any battle properly, certain basic elements must be addressed and thoroughly understood. The Red Army of 1943 had evolved from bitter defeats in 1941 and 1942 into the modern colossus that would bring Hitler's Third Reich to its knees. Soviet armored formations were the strike force used to force a decision during critical periods of battle. Understanding how these units were organized and employed is an essential building block for understanding doctrine. The available equipment, command and control techniques, and status of units all influenced the battle. Stalin's decision to accept the German attack was a bold move, but the actual disposition of armored forces was the key to victory. Were these forces disposed correctly prior to battle, and were they employed effectively throughout the fight? Even among the Soviets there is much disagreement concerning these questions.<sup>7</sup> Without doubt, the German concept of battle influenced the Soviet response. Despite superb intelligence supplied by a Soviet spy, the Red Army still misread some critical aspects of the German battle plan. This fault came close to having serious consequences on the southern front of the Kursk salient, and only tenacious action by Soviet troops saved the day.

The actual conduct of the battle, covering 4-12 July, is the focus of Chapter 3. To simplify ease of understanding of this colossal battle, events on the Central Front are covered in their entirety, followed by the German assault on the Voronezh Front. Because of the successful Soviet defense, these battles remained two distinct events, linked together only at the highest levels. Model's 9th Army attack in the north was predicated on the conventional infantry assault to force a penetration, thus allowing the panzers a corridor into the depths of the Red Army defense. As will be shown, this technique resulted in a World War I type battle with enormous casualties and little gain. Conversely, Army Group South, under the adept leadership of Field Marshal von Manstein, utilized significantly different tactics. Panzers, operating in masses of 50-100 tanks swamped the defenders of 6th Guards Army from the outset, forcing the Voronezh Front into a precarious position from the opening day of the German offensive. The power of the panzer divisions eventually forced General Vatutin, commander of this front, into a counterattack of much smaller magnitude than he originally intended.

Analysis and implications of the battle will be addressed in Chapter Four. Research objectives will be analyzed and lessons learned discussed. A critical look at the actual employment of Soviet armored units during the battle, the disposition of tank corps and armies prior to the battle, synchronization of the commitment of these units, and the flexibility of the Soviet commanders will be addressed in this chapter. German commanders continually stress the inflexibility of

their Soviet counterparts,<sup>8</sup> and this assertion demands closer scrutiny. Throughout the war Soviet leaders showed remarkable zeal and daring, and their victory at Kursk begs a reassessment of their performance. Particularly interesting is the employment of the counterattack by Soviet armor. Although a proven doctrine for the employment of tank armies was lacking prior to Kursk, the Red Army had learned well the effectiveness of massed armor in the attack.

Chapter Five is concerned with implications of the Battle of Kursk for today. Many may question the validity of projecting historical lessons into the present. Albeit history may not necessarily repeat itself, many useful lessons can be extracted when properly analyzed. I do not feel there is sufficient emphasis placed on studying Soviet military history. Much of today's Soviet military doctrine evolves from experience in the Great Patriotic War. Kursk was the first Soviet victory over the Wehrmacht in a summer battle. It holds special significance to the Soviets because the Red Army accepted battle at the time and place of Hitler's choosing and emerged victorious. The Soviets continue to study this famous battle because they maintain it still has many useful applications.<sup>9</sup> As a classic battle in deliberate defense, serious study promises many dividends. Chapter Six will contain conclusions based on the analysis.

Materials used represent a variety of sources and authors. The main stream of information comes from both German and Soviet sources. Quite naturally, the documents from German authors focus primarily on the Wehrmacht point of view, giving detailed accounts of the action with little credit to the Red Army. Conversely, Soviet authors



emphasize the contribution of the communist party to a large extent, and expand on the triumph of Soviet military doctrine. However, by analyzing both sources, one is able to extract pertinent information free from the bias of the antagonists. English translations of Soviet articles in the JPRS series proved exceptionally beneficial. Articles found in the Soviet Military Review, by and large, were disappointing and were of little value. Many western sources reflect a German bias and fail to analyze the Soviet position in near as much depth as the German. This may be as a result of the scarcity of official Soviet source availability and an over-reliance on German documentation.

Additionally, there were many discrepancies between Soviet and German sources with regard to the quantity of material, weapons density, and casualty figures. Figures used in this study were selected in accordance with the best judgement of available data while cross-referencing sources and assessing the reliability of authors. There is a wealth of information available in secondary sources for peripheral study on topics such as organization, weapon systems and strategic background.

The primary limitation in this study was the lack of official Soviet military documents. Without the availability of after-action reports of Red Army units, I was forced to rely heavily on books and articles by Soviet writers. Although this in itself may not be significant, the major drawback is that there is no method of verifying actual facts. Additionally, this may lead to misinterpretation of Soviet authors. I proceeded on the assumption that Soviet primary sources were correct unless I was able to amass significant evidence to

the contrary. Another limitation is the limited amount of translated Soviet documents and books. Without Russian language, I was limited strictly to translations. Despite this shortcoming, I feel I have sufficient available data representing both German and Soviet views to overcome this shortfall.

The focus of this study will be limited to the Soviet defense at Kursk. Subsequent Soviet counteroffensives aimed at the Orel and Belgorod-Kharkov areas will only be viewed briefly. Although these offensives were an integral part of the Battle of Kursk, they are beyond the scope of this study. Soviet offensive operations during Kursk are separate issues and are well worth an independent study, because they are particularly important in understanding the complete evolution of Soviet military doctrine in World War II.

Karl Von Clausewitz in his famous work, On War, asked the rhetorical question, "What is the object of defense?" This was immediately followed by his own answer, "Preservation."<sup>10</sup> Although the Soviets do not stress Clausewitz as their preeminent authority on war, this is precisely what the Red Army sought to do at Kursk in 1943. They accepted the German assault in an effort to preserve their own forces, particularly their armored and mechanized units, for subsequent offensive operations. Many Wehrmacht commanders, who professed intimate knowledge of Clausewitz, failed to heed a significant point he stressed when addressing the defense. "It is the fact that time which is allowed to pass unused accumulates to the credit of the defender."<sup>11</sup> This is precisely what Manstein and others feared as they readied their storm troops for Citadel. The Red

Army, for its part, was confident of victory and trained to a fever pitch. Armed with the foreknowledge of what the "Hitlerites" were trying to attempt, the Soviet troops sensed the possibility of victory. Yet a vital question remained to be answered. Would the rejuvenated Soviet armored forces be equal to the supreme test about to be thrust upon them? The god of war was about to smile on the new Red Legions.

## ENDNOTES, CHAPTER 1

1. Jukes, Geoffrey. Kursk: The Clash of Armor, p. 6.
2. Ibid., pp 78-79.
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4. Mackintosh, Malcolm. Juggernaut: A History of the Soviet Armed Forces, p. 128.
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9. Parotkin, Battle of Kursk, 1943, p. 328.
10. Clausewitz, Carl Von. On War, p. 357.
11. Ibid., p 357.

## CHAPTER II

### THE STRATEGIC SETTING

1943 had an ominous beginning for German forces, particularly in the east. Stalingrad was still surrounded by a strong, rejuvenated Red Army anticipating victory. The Soviet army, as well as the Wehrmacht, knew it was only a matter of time before the once proud German Sixth Army was totally destroyed. The final Russian assault on Stalingrad began on 10 January, and the beleaguered garrison surrendered on 3 February. The Soviets claim 90,000 prisoners<sup>1</sup> and the Germans admit to 140,000 killed in action. The German army had suffered its greatest military reversal of the war.

This stunning success was quickly followed by an overly optimistic strategic offensive by four Soviet fronts; Voronezh, Southwest, South and North Caucasus, with the main effort by General F. I. Golikov's Voronezh and General N. F. Vatutin's Southwest Fronts. The Soviets attempted to exploit the German disarray following the encirclement of the Sixth Army, and the defeat of the relieving Fourth Panzer Army led by Colonel General Hoth. Hopes ran high in the Soviet High Command about the possibility of liberating the Donbass industrial area and pushing the remaining German forces away from the Transcaucasian oilfields. A vigorous offensive would place Soviet forces once again on the banks of the Dnieper River.<sup>2</sup> Although an ambitious plan, it appeared to be feasible in view of recent defeats inflicted on the Wehrmacht.

The German line was thinly held, with a significant portion manned by allies. The Eighth Italian, Second and Third Rumanian Armies had barely survived the Soviet onslaught at Stalingrad. The Third Rumanian Army had been punished severely, receiving the Soviet main attack north of the city. Although brave soldiers, their armies were poorly equipped and totally inadequate for winter warfare against a victorious and vengeful Red Army. Following the blue print used at Stalingrad, this new offensive struck at the weak German allied forces on 13 January.<sup>3</sup> Within two weeks, Voronezh Front had destroyed the Second Hungarian and Eighth Italian Armies, capturing 80,000 soldiers.<sup>4</sup> General Golikov's armies advanced almost 90 miles on a front of 150 miles. Vatutin's Southwest Front mauled the Third Rumanian Army and kept pace with its sister front to the north (Map A). An easy Soviet victory appeared within reach.

Although the Wehrmacht had been severely punished at Stalingrad, it was still an extremely dangerous adversary and confident of its mastery over the Red Army. In response to the new Soviet offensive, Field Marshal von Manstein, Commander of Army Group South, began formulating a plan to stem and even reverse the Soviet avalanche. His intention was to inflict a major defeat on the Red Army.

Manstein probably was Germany's greatest military strategist. He had been instrumental in developing the plan that defeated France in 1940,<sup>5</sup> and he was the victor of the battle for the Soviet fortress of Sevastopol in 1942, as well as the subsequent Crimean campaign. He assessed the situation as an opportunity to destroy large

Soviet formations. Despite Hitler's reluctance, Manstein devised a bold counteroffensive based on a shrewd estimate of Soviet intentions and the status of Soviet forces. This was to be a classic example of mobile defensive warfare.

Manstein's plan basically was to assemble large panzer forces to the north and south of the main Soviet thrust. At the designated moment he would unleash these forces on the exhausted Red formations and destroy them. This was then to be followed by further attacks to the north to recapture Kharkov, Belgorod and Kursk (Map B). The plan was to unfold in three distinct phases. First, the SS Panzer Corps was to assemble in the vicinity of Krasnograd while First and Fourth Panzer Armies assembled south of Krasnoarmeyskoye. These units were to strike the successful right flank of the Southwest Front, pushing it east of the Donets. Regrouping south of Kharkov, this combined force would then strike at the Voronezh Front, push the enemy east of the Donets, and recapture Kharkov and Belgorod. In the final phase, the attack would continue north, in conjunction with an assault with Second Panzer Army of Army Group Center from the vicinity of Orel to recapture Kursk.<sup>6</sup>

By now the Red Army had overextended itself and was ripe for defeat. The armies of the Voronezh and Southwest Fronts had been in continuous action since the Stalingrad counteroffensive, almost three months earlier. Supplies were short, casualties in men and equipment high, and maintenance was sorely needed. However, flushed with victory, Stalin pressed the offensive. A gap appeared between the Voronezh and Southwest Fronts, and Manstein took advantage of it by striking on 19 February.

Phase one of the counterstroke went much as planned. Vatutin's Southwest Front lost most of its tanks and was forced to retreat, leaving the left flank of the Voronezh Front open to further German advances. Golikov had anticipated the German attack before Vatutin did, and had begun to wheel two of his armies south to face the new threat. The Soviet Third Tank Army was transferred to the Southwest Front to stem the panzers, but this unit was destroyed by the superior German concentration of armor.<sup>7</sup>

Manstein then regrouped his forces south of Kharkov and commenced phase two. Having to keep a tight rein on the SS units, Manstein maintained the momentum of his armored fist and on 14 March, Kharkov fell for the third time to Hitler's storm troopers. Belgorod fell shortly after to the "GrossDeutschland" Division of Army Detachment Kempf. Phase two was complete.<sup>8</sup>

By now Stalin had realized his mistake and on 13 or 14 March, summoned Marshal of the Soviet Union Georgy K. Zhukov, Deputy Supreme Commander, to his headquarters at Moscow. Zhukov was ordered to fly to the threatened sector and salvage the situation. Marshal Zhukov was Stalin's "fire brigade." He was continually sent to the most threatened sectors and he responded magnificently. In 1939, he had defeated a Japanese army on the Khalkhin-Gol in the far eastern provinces of Russia. He was sent to Leningrad in 1941 to blunt the victorious Nazi advance. Subsequently, he commanded the West Front protecting Moscow, where he organized the tenacious defense and counteroffensive that again thwarted the Germans. He was the architect of the counteroffensive at Stalingrad that destroyed the



strongest German field army of the Wehrmacht,<sup>9</sup> annihilating twenty-two Axis divisions with a quarter of a million men. Undoubtly, Zhukov was the nemesis of the German Army. Wherever he went, the Nazi war machine floundered or was broken. This was the man Stalin sent to stop Manstein's final phase of his counteroffensive. As always, Zhukov was successful.

After arriving, Marshal Zhukov relieved Golikov, commander of the Voronezh Front, replacing him with Vatutin. Zhukov then submitted an urgent request for Stavka and adjacent front reserves. Shortly thereafter, Colonel General A. M. Vasilevsky, Chief of the General Staff, notified Zhukov that the 21st and 64th Armies were moving into the Belgorod area and the 1st Tank Army was enroute for Zhukov's personal use as he deemed necessary. These forces were deployed east and north of Belgorod, and stopped further German advances.<sup>10</sup> Phase three of Manstein's operation failed to materialize. Manstein<sup>10</sup> says the assault on Kursk was abandoned due to deteriorating weather conditions and "as Army Group Center declared itself unable to cooperate."<sup>11</sup> Although Manstein fails to give credit to the arrival of Zhukov, it is obvious that Zhukov's appearance with two combined arms armies and one tank army influenced the lack of further success of the counterstroke.

With the cessation of Manstein's counterstroke in mid-March, mutual exhaustion set in on the Eastern front. Both antagonists had temporarily reached the end of their strength. In the past three months, the Red Army had done what many had thought impossible. Soviet forces had completed the destruction of the mightiest German

field army in one of the greatest defensive battles in history, then launched an offensive of its own, albeit an ill advised one. It had reconquered a significant portion of lost territory and severely mauled the southern wing of the German army in the east. At the same time, the Soviets had overextended and exhausted themselves. Replacements in men and equipment were badly need before any thought of continued offensive operations could be pursued. The Germans, too, despite Manstein's recent victory on the Donbas, had been severely shaken. The Wehrmacht also was in urgent need of reinforcements and equipment. Mutual exhaustion caused both sides to use the muddy season to lick their wounds and prepare for the critical summer campaign.

When analyzing the background of the Battle of Kursk, the observer must realize that the engagement was greatly influenced by actions far from the east. By this stage of the war, Hitler's Third Reich was on the decline. El Alamein had extinguished Germans dreams of conquering the Middle East, cutting the Suez Canal and attacking the Soviet Union from the south. Despite the fact that Rommel's campaign in North Africa was always a sideshow as far as Hitler was concerned, the defeat of the "Desert Fox" was a severe blow to his prestige and a tremendous boost for the Allies. The Anglo-American landings in French North Africa in November 1942 were followed on 13 May 1943 by the surrender of Army Group Africa in Tunis. 200,000 Axis prisoners marched into captivity.<sup>12</sup>

The western allied bombing of industrial Germany was also well under way. Although it failed to reduce production, it did restrict

growth and force industrial complexes to disperse. In addition, heavy bombing forced the Germans to funnel resources to fighters and anti-aircraft artillery to protect the Fatherland at the expense of the field armies. Withdrawal of fighter protection was to be sorely felt by the armies in the field as the war continued.<sup>13</sup> The defeat at Stalingrad was a rude awakening for the German people, who for the first time probably realized that defeat was now possible. The defeat came not only as a shock to the Germans, but to Hitler's allies as well. Benito Mussolini's position in Italy was tenuous at best; Rumania's Marshal Ian Antonescu and Hungary's Admiral Miklos Horthy also faced unenviable political problems. Their armies in the east supporting the Wehrmacht had been severely mauled with staggering losses. Faith in Hitler was at an all time low, and there were many pressures to bring the remnants of their armies home.<sup>14</sup> In short, Hitler's alliance was weakened considerably.

Hitler's prestige at home and abroad demanded a show of strength. The Führer had to give the German people the appearance of regaining the initiative on the eastern front. In February 1943, one month after Stalingrad, Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, proclaimed a state of "total war" for the Reich. Consumer goods and services were curtailed, jobs offering military exemption were reduced and all civilian men from 16 to 65 and women 17 to 50 had to register for work in war plants.<sup>15</sup> In conjunction with this, Hitler issued a decree that any soldiers in combat, from general to private, were to punish disobedience and defeatism by shooting transgressors on the spot. Desperation was becoming the order of the day for Hitler and his Reich.

The conversion to total war fell short of expectations, but surprising results were attained. Albert Speer, Reich Minister for Armaments and Munitions, was the mastermind behind this tremendous effort. The output of aircraft and tanks doubled, while the production of heavy guns tripled. With the suspension of previous exemptions, including those for sole surviving sons, 560,000 recruits were found. By the summer of 1943, the German armed forces totalled ten million men, only 240,000 fewer than the pre-Stalingrad peak. This was truly a superb showing in the face of immense disaster.<sup>16</sup>

General Heinz Guderian, recently appointed as Inspector General of Armored Troops, urgently argued there be no strategic offensive at all on the Eastern Front in 1943. Upon assuming his new position he was appalled at the condition of his beloved panzer troops. In January 1943, the eighteen panzer divisions in the east counted only 495 servicable tanks, an average of 27 tanks per division. The once proud armored divisions, the pride of the Wehrmacht, verged on extinction. Guderian urged Hitler to remain on the defensive and conserve his armored strength for further operations in 1944. Not only was this politically unacceptable, but it certainly did not suit Hitler's personality.<sup>17</sup>

Field Marshal von Manstein felt the Wehrmacht had two choices in the east. The first, which was his preference, was to conduct a strategic defense. He recommended waiting for the Soviets to attack, accept the blow, wear down the assault formations, then mount a counterattack similar to his counterstroke in February and March of 1943 against Vatutin and Golikov. Manstein referred to this as the "backhand" option, and submitted it to Hitler in late February.

Manstein felt Stalin would not wait for a second front to be established in the west before launching his next offensive. The Soviet dictator would not risk the possibility of the western allies beating him to the Balkans. Because of this, Manstein reasoned Stalin would attack against Army Group South to slice off the "Donets Bulge," aiming to breakthrough in the Kharkov region, or across the Donets and drive behind the German front to destroy the Wehrmacht's southern wing on the Black Sea. This would leave Army Group A isolated in the Kuban bridgehead, liberate the Donets basin industrial area, and open the way to the Balkans. In turn, this would threaten the only major source of oil in Axis held Europe, the Rumanian oilfields at Ploesti.<sup>18</sup> In response to this Manstein wanted to give up the front along the Donets and Muis Rivers, and draw the Soviets into the lower Dnieper region. He would then assemble all his armor west of Kharkov and assault into the flank of the enemy formations moving towards the Dneiper River. Hitler would not sanction the abandonment of the Donets basin because of the negative effects on the Turks and Rumanians. In addition, he loathed relinquishing territory for any reason.<sup>19</sup>

Manstein's second option was more to Hitler's liking. This was the "forehand" option. Here Manstein envisioned preempting the inevitable Soviet offensive before preparations could be completed. With the Reich on a total war footing, the logical questions to follow were where, and when to attack, and in what strength? Hitler again would attack in the east.

After Stalingrad and the massive losses of the two previous years, most German generals realized the Wehrmacht no longer was capable of launching major offensives on the scale of 1941 and 1942. Despite this, Manstein felt the Red Army could be punished enough to accept a stalemate. Although he did not feel the Germans were sufficiently strong to force a decision in the east, he still believed German units and their commanders were superior to their Soviet counterparts.<sup>20</sup> The key was to take what limited assets that were being made available and strike a blow that would stun the resurgent Red Army.

On 13 March Hitler stressed to his military commanders it was important "to take the initiative at certain sectors of the front if possible before the Russians do, in order to be able to dictate their actions in at least one sector."<sup>21</sup> With this guidance, the German General Staff surveyed the eastern front searching for a vulnerable sector to strike. A quick glance at the situation map of the eastern front in 1943 revealed that it was obvious why the Kursk salient caught the eye (Map C). The elimination of this salient would have many positive effects. At the time of conception, despite the weakness of available German forces, it was felt an offensive would be successful. Although German strength was low, so too were Soviet formations defending the bulge. Manstein felt by massing all available reserves, and striking as soon as weather conditions permitted, he could preempt any Soviet attempt to strike first. A successful offensive would shorten the front, freeing badly needed reserves for the forthcoming summer campaign. These forces would

surely be needed to meet the next Soviet assault. Success would also bolster sagging morale at home, as well as reinforce German prestige in the eyes of its allies. Operations Order Number Six was written on 15 April 1943. In it Hitler stated, "I have decided to undertake as the first priority of this year the Citadel offensive, as soon as the weather permits."<sup>22</sup>

As the German planners eyed the Kursk salient as the objective of their summer offensive, Stalin and his commanders were far from idle. The Kursk salient provided numerous opportunities for the Soviet High Command as well. From this bulge Soviet forces could strike in several directions: north toward Orel, or south toward Belgorod and Kharkov with an impetus to reconquering the Don basin and its rich industrial prizes. However, any assault from this salient was fraught with danger from several quarters. By Soviet intelligence calculations, the Wehrmacht had available for operations upwards of forty infantry and twenty panzer divisions, one motorized and one cavalry division, plus the SS Panzer Corps. When viewed with the recent Soviet setback in the Kharkov area, the possibilities for renewed German offensives loomed large indeed.<sup>23</sup> The Soviets estimated that facing the Central Front were 15-17 infantry and 7-8 panzer divisions, while 12-13 infantry and 4 panzer divisions confronted the Voronezh Front. In addition, 7-9 infantry with 9 panzer(6 of them SS) divisions faced the Southwest Front. Despite the appalling losses the Nazi army had suffered during the past winter, this represented a formidable offensive array of immense proportions.<sup>24</sup>

Stalin, still haunted by his success at Stalingrad and the subsequent offensives, truly wanted his armies to seize the initiative. No doubt he made an agonizing decision to accept the German assault, especially in light of the defensive debacles of 1941 and 1942. The Red Army had never fared well against the offensive might of the German army in summer, even when established in prepared defensive positions. Despite the fact the Soviets had eventually stymied the Germans' advances, reaction had always taken an enormous cost in men, material, and territory. Would the outcome be different in the summer of 1943?

On 8 April, Marshal Zhukov submitted a strategic appreciation to Stalin following an extensive tour of the Voronezh Front.<sup>25</sup> In this estimate Zhukov concluded:

(1) Due to heavy German losses, the Nazis could only attack on a much narrower front than previously, then they must do so in stages;

(2) The German objective in their 1943 campaign would be Moscow;

(3) Because of present deployment in the vicinity of Kursk, the Germans would attack to destroy Soviet forces there with a view to outflank Moscow;

(4) The German attack would take place in three stages:

a. 13-15 tank divisions would attack in concentric directions from Orel and Belgorod-Kharkov sectors, with supporting attacks from the western face of the salient;

b. During the second stage, the enemy would attack the Southwest Front;



c. The final stage would attempt to outflank Moscow from the southeast;

(5) Due to severe casualties in infantry divisions, the Germans had to rely primarily on their panzer and Luftwaffe formations for offensive strength;

(6) Zhukov recommended a substantial increase in antitank formations to blunt the German strength.

Zhukov concluded his appreciation by stating, "an offensive on the part of our troops in the near future aimed at forestalling the enemy I consider to be pointless. It would be better if we grind down the enemy in our defenses, break up his tank forces, and then, introducing fresh reserves, go over to a general offensive to pulverize once and for all his main concentrations."<sup>26</sup> Without question, Zhukov was not just advocating a defensive battle, but the total destruction of German panzer formations and along with it, the offensive might of the German war machine. This was the same formula Zhukov had successfully used in his previous battles.

On 12 April Stalin was briefed by Zhukov and Vasilevsky. Following this briefing Stalin begrudgingly accepted the concept of defensive battle, the same "backhand" option Manstein professed. Eventually the Supreme Soviet Commander acquiesced and totally agreed with his two deputies, but doubts still lingered until the battle was joined.

Kursk lies just over 300 miles south of Moscow. In 1943 its population was significantly reduced from its prewar strength of 120,000.<sup>27</sup> This small town had no strategic value, except it was

the center of a huge salient (about half the size of England)<sup>28</sup> and in July 1943 was surrounded by a large portion of two of the most mighty armies in history, poised for a duel to the death.

North of the salient, which ran 70 miles from north to south at its base and 90 miles in an east-west direction, lay Orel on the Oka River (Map D). Orel was the hub of logistical support for the German Ninth Army of Army Group Center. To the south lay Kharkov, the fourth largest city in Russia. Bitterly fought over, Kharkov had almost been totally destroyed by German assaults that had won Hitler the city three times. Almost equal distant between these two cities lay Kursk. The salient was divided by the Seim River which runs west into Kursk, then curves to the southeast. Forty miles south, the Psel River parallels the Seim and flows south of Oboyan. Running through Belgorod, the Donets is a formidable obstacle requiring engineer support to cross. Although the Psel and Donets influenced the battle, they were not dominate factors. The Pena, branching off of the Psel, is characterized by a swift current with steep banks on both sides.

The terrain rises gradually to the north, favoring the defender. The roads throughout the salient were typical unimproved Russian tracks which quickly became quagmires following heavy rains. Dense corn fields impeded observation and direct fire.<sup>29</sup> Numerous streams throughout the bulge, particularly in the south, stymied movement of armored units. Swampy terrain to the south was prevalent along stream beds and played an important part in the movement of German armored reserves. Large ridges throughout the salient facilitated the movement of massed armored formations, despite the

limitations of the adjacent low areas. Although not ideal tank terrain, it was adequate for both attacker and defender.<sup>30</sup>

July in Russia is "hot and sultry"<sup>31</sup> and heat took its toll on assault formations. Although the rainfall is not heavy in the summer, sudden cloudbursts adversely affected the movements of mechanized units. Until the rain settled the dust, large clouds surrounded armor columns, making undetected moves difficult.

The Red Army was a master in the use of cover, concealment and camouflage. Superb use of deception and camouflage techniques enabled the Soviets to surprise the Germans throughout the battle by making instinctive use of the terrain to such an extent that detection of positions was impossible until the Russians opened fire.<sup>32</sup> Even in desolate plateau areas, the Soviets exercised superior use of limited cover and concealment.

South from Orel, the major avenue of approach paralleled the Orel-Kursk railroad running through Ponyri directly south to Kursk. This ridge provided adequate maneuver space for large armored forces. Terrain on either side of this ridge is crosscompartmented, limiting movement. To the south, the Donets and surrounding terrain severely restricted east-west movement from Belgorod. A dominate ridge line running through Oboyan facilitates quick movement to that point. From there, the best avenue of approach swings to the northeast and allows flank attacks to the east of Kursk. Other routes due east of Belgorod toward Korocha and Novyy Oskol are severely hampered by compartmentalization. The terrain favored the defense and the Soviets made maximum use of this advantage. As German commanders analyzed the terrain they

felt although it was not ideal, it was adequate to support their attack.

Although the Wehrmacht had suffered setbacks early in 1943, Hitler clung tenaciously to a vast array of conquered lands. Western Europe was still completely dominated by the heavy hand of Nazism and would be so until June 1944. Hitler's legions stretched from the beaches of western France to the Donets in the east, and north from Norway to the toe of Italy in the Mediterranean. Totalling forty two more divisions than when the invasion of the Soviet Union began in June 1941, the Wehrmacht and its allies numbered 196 German and 32 satellite divisions with eight separate brigades representing over ten million soldiers. The main emphasis for the Germans was still in the east, where seventy-five percent of all German forces were deployed. Seven divisions were stationed in Finland, twelve in Norway and Denmark, twenty-five in France and the Low Countries, three in Italy and eight in the Balkans.<sup>33</sup>

Facing the Soviets, the Germans deployed 161 divisions (26 of which were panzer)<sup>34</sup> organized into four Army Groups; North, Center, South, and Army Group "A". On the surface, this represented an impressive battle array, however, most formations in the east had been bled white in the previous two years of continuous fighting and were no longer of the strength and caliber of the prewar units. Infantry divisions, the mainstay of the Wehrmacht, had suffered tremendous casualties, directly affecting planning for the summer campaign.

Assault formations for the coming battle came from Army Groups Center and South. Model's Ninth Army of AGC would form the northern

assault group, while von Manstein's AGS would provide the Fourth Panzer Army commanded by Hoth and Army Detachment Kempf, named for its commander. Hitler had specified in his operations order that the coming battle would demand the best commanders, units and troops, and he made every effort to provide them. The Germans amassed 900,000 men, 2700 tanks and assault guns, and supported them with 10,000 pieces of artillery and 1800 aircraft. Two-thirds of the infantry assault divisions were brought to the full strength of 12,500 men, while the panzer divisions were strengthened to 16,000 men with up to 209 tanks and assault guns per division.<sup>35</sup>

Ninth Army was organized into three panzer and two infantry corps, with four armored divisions in reserve.<sup>36</sup> Field marshal von Kluge, commander of Army Group Center, had strained every fiber to insure this army had the heaviest punch available, providing eight panzer or panzer grenadier divisions (sixty percent of his total armored forces.) Seven infantry divisions would participate in the attack. The ground forces would be supported by Luftflotten 6<sup>37</sup> (Airfleet).

Model's main attack would be with the 47th Panzer Corps, comprised of the 2nd, 9th, and 20th Panzer Divisions, and 10 infantry divisions plus some additional special units. 41st Panzer Corps, attacking on the left flank of 47th Panzer, was a supporting attack. This corps was organized around the 18th Panzer Division, supported by two panzer jaeger (tank destroyer) detachments of 45 Ferdinands each.<sup>38</sup> 23rd Corps, with three infantry divisions, was to attack and seize Maloarkhangelsk, securing the left flank of the Army. 46th Panzer Corps, consisting of three divisions of infantry with no panzer

division, was the anchor on the right flank of the Army. Its mission was to protect the western flank of 47th Panzer Corps as it thrust south.

Von Manstein's southern assault grouping was larger than Ninth Army, comprising eleven panzer or panzer grenadier divisions, supported by only five infantry divisions, organized into 4th Panzer Army and Army Detachment Kempf and supported by Luftflotten 8. 4th Panzer Army had two panzer corps, 2nd SS and 48th, and the 52nd Infantry Corps. No reserve was provided. Hitler's "Black Guards" represented an impressive offensive capability comprised of the Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler, Das Reich, and Totenkopf panzer divisions with 343 tanks and 95 assault guns. 48th Panzer Corps was even more powerful boasting 600 panzers in the 3rd, 10th and 11th Panzer Divisions and the GrossDeutschland Panzer Grenadier Division. GrossDeutschland PGD, the Wehrmacht's counter to Hitler's SS, alone had 180 tanks and almost 25,000 men.<sup>39</sup> Without a doubt, these two corps represented the cream of the German Army in 1943, and much depended on their performance. Detachment Kempf in essence was an army sized element, deployed with the 3rd Panzer corps along with the 42nd and 12th Infantry Corps. 3rd Panzer commanded the 6th, 7th and 19th panzer divisions with over 370 tanks and assault guns. The German Luftwaffe, by denuding Norway, Finland, and the Leningrad and Crimea sectors, concentrated over 1800 aircraft in preparation for the battle. Air support was crucial for success in as much as the weak infantry units were unable to provide the necessary support for the panzers.<sup>40</sup>

The major reason for Hitler's continual postponement of Citadel was his concern for his panzers. The Soviet T-34 medium tank had roughly handled the panzers every since its introduction in 1941, and only poor Russian handling of this superb tank had averted catastrophe. In response to the T-34, German industry developed the medium Panther and heavy Tiger tanks. Hitler put much faith in these new tanks, however, production problems continually nagged full employment of these systems. By April 1943, only 50 Panthers per month were produced, along with 25 Tigers,<sup>41</sup> compared with Soviet T-34 production of perhaps one thousand a month.

The Panther, weighing forty nine tons, would eventually become a worthy opponent; however, at the Battle of Kursk it was mechanically unreliable. Its 75mm long barreled high velocity gun was more than a match for the T-34. To compete against the Soviet heavy KV-1 tank, the Wehrmacht fielded the Tiger tank. Armed with the famous 88mm gun, converted from the antiaircraft gun, the Tiger would become the scourge of all allied armor. Tested near Leningrad in the autumn of 1942, the Tiger showed promising results despite its poor showing. Poor mechanical reliability combined with low production rates foreshadowed a weak performance at Kursk.<sup>42</sup> Hitler's trump card was to be his super heavy assault gun/tank destroyer, the sixty-five ton Ferdinand. This monster was designed to facilitate a penetration against heavy antitank weapons. Ninety of these were organized into two special units of 45 each.<sup>43</sup> As with the Tiger and Panther, the Ferdinand was not fully tested prior to commitment to battle. Lacking speed as well as machine guns for close in fighting against

infantry, this spelled the doom for its unfortunate crews. Hitler continually delayed Citadel awaiting the arrival of his cherished new panzers. This delay only assisted the Red Army, especially since the Soviets could vastly outproduce the Germans in all weapon systems.

By July 1943 the Red Army on the Eastern front stretched over 2000 miles from north of Leningrad to the Caucasus mountains in the south. Facing the Germans, the Soviets deployed six and a half million soldiers supported by 99,000 guns and mortars, 2,200 rocket launchers, over 9,500 tanks and 8,300 combat aircraft.<sup>44</sup> Organized into nine fronts, the largest offensive strength was oriented in the south in the vicinity of Kursk.

Increased production of weapons had facilitated the development and organization of five tank armies plus a variety of separate tank and mechanized corps. Eighteen heavy tank regiments were held in Stavka reserve for breakthroughs and reinforcements of attacking armies. Each front had its own air army of between seven and eight hundred aircraft to be used in support of the ground operations. The Supreme Command reserves totalled several combined, two tank and one air army.<sup>45</sup> Undoubtly the Red Army had developed beyond all expectations, especially when the crippling losses of the previous years were considered. The armor and mechanized formations had survived their baptism of fire and had weathered terrible years of punishment inflicted by the Wehrmacht. Professional commanders, steeped in combat experience, now commanded these units and they were confident of their abilities.



The corps had undergone its third evolution in the Soviet armored force structure. The armored corps consisted of three armored brigades and one motorized brigade, totalling 180 tanks and a little over 10,000 men. A mechanized corps was organized into three motorized brigades (each with a small armored regiment) and one armored brigade, comprising about 200 tanks with 15,000 men. The special heavy breakthrough tank regiments were equipped with 21 KV heavy tanks.<sup>46</sup> Independent tank brigades had 107 tanks without infantry support.<sup>47</sup>

The front mobile groups were tank armies of 450-560 tanks and self-propelled guns organized into two tank and one mechanized corps supported by one or two SP artillery regiments and up to several rocket launcher regiments.<sup>48</sup> This force represented a tremendous amount of mobile firepower when effectively employed in mass. Experience and lessons learned from the Germans, had taught the Red Army that armor was best employed in mass and that quick exploitation offered the best opportunities. On defense, massed armored units created the ability to quickly respond to the inevitable panzer breakthroughs. Historically, the Soviets had not effectively controlled their armored units will in the defense, hence Stalin's hesitation to accept the "backhand" option.

The Kursk salient was effectively divided in half with the Central Front in the north and Voronezh Front in the south (MAP E). The Central Front, commanded by General K.K. Rokossovsky, deployed five combined arms armies (13th, 48th, 60th, 65th, and the 70th) and

the 2nd Tank Army.<sup>49</sup> For air support, the Stavka provided the 16th Air Army. Front reserves consisted of the 9th and 19th tank corps and the 18th Guards Infantry Corps.<sup>50</sup>

General N.F. Vatutin, commanding the Voronezh Front, was responsible for the southern portion of the bulge. His front was organized into five combined arms armies (6th and 7th Guards, 38th, 40th and the 69th), 1st Tank Army and the 2nd Air Army. The 6th and 7th Guards Armies, veterans of Stalingrad (formerly the 21st and 64th Armies) represented the best troops available within the Front. Front reserves consisted of two corps, the 35th Guards and 5th Guards Tank Corps.<sup>51</sup>

In response to the anticipated German advance, the Soviet Supreme Command contemplated the appropriate use of its strategic reserves. Based on its decision to accept the German attack followed by a counteroffensive, in early March it was decided to create a special reserve front behind the Kursk salient in anticipation of the Soviet attack. Prior to the battle this front evolved from the Reserve Front in April, to the Steppe Military District and finally on 9 July to the Steppe Front. Its organization was dynamic, changing with the addition of units as more became available, or withdrawn for commitment during battle.<sup>52</sup> At the beginning of the battle the Steppe Front, commanded by General I. Konev, was comprised of four combined arms armies (5th Guards, 27th, 47th and the 53rd), 5th Guards Tank Army and the 5th Air Army. Additionally, it possessed the 3rd and 4th Guards and 10th Tank Corps; 1st, 2nd and 3rd Guards Mechanized Corps, along with the 3rd, 5th and 7th Guards Cavalry Corps.<sup>53</sup>

Beyond a doubt, this front represented a massive strike force. Its presence in the field proved to be the major determining factor at the crucial point of the battle.

As Hitler continually postponed Citadel awaiting for the arrival of his coveted new panzers, he was falling farther behind in the production battle. While German industry struggled to produce barely 200 a month on a variety of tank systems, the Soviets concentrated on producing only two major tanks, the T-34 and the KV, to the tune of 2,000 per month. Guderian had warned Hitler that continued delays would result in an increase of 60 new Soviet armored brigades, thus dooming Citadel to failure.<sup>54</sup> The T-34 medium tank was the nemesis of the German panzers. Its wide tracks gave it superb mobility in weather that immobilized German tanks. With its 76mm gun, the T-34 more than outmatched the standard Mk III and Mk IV German tanks. Although the Red Army still possessed large numbers of obsolete tanks, a significant portion of their motor park consisted of the T-34. The KV heavy tank, weighing forty-two tons was used primarily in breakthrough regiments, and was all but impervious to the heaviest antitank weapons.<sup>55</sup>

The die was now cast for one of the greatest defensive battles in military history. Hitler was determined to seize the strategic initiative once again in the east before the Western Allies could come to the aid of Stalin. This was to be the Wehrmachts' last major attempt to force a decision on the eastern front. For his part, the Supreme Commander of the Red Army, Joseph Stalin, was anxious for the impending summer battles. The Red Army had survived another terrible

winter, but the latest battles around Kharkov proved the German army was still a mighty foe and that the final decision was still in doubt.

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### CHAPTER III

#### THE BATTLE

Once Hitler committed himself, the Army High Command (OKH) under General Kurt Zeitzler, commenced planning with a stubborn determination to renew the prestige of the Wehrmacht. "The objective of the attack," Hitler stated, "is to encircle the enemy forces in the Kursk area by means of a well coordinated and rapid thrust of two attacking armies from the areas of Belgorod and south of Orel and to annihilate them by a concentric attack."<sup>1</sup> The simple but well tried double envelopment using massed panzers ala Minsk, Uman, Kiev and Vyazma was to be used again. Unfortunately for the German army, it had gone to the well once too often.

According to Operations Order Number Six, the attacking forces were to focus their efforts on a narrow front and, in one powerful thrust, link up east of Kursk. By destroying the defending Soviet forces in the salient, a new and shorter defensive line was to be established along the line of Nezhega-Korocha sector-Skorodnoye-Tim-east of Shchigry-Sosna sector<sup>2</sup> (Map F). The emphasis throughout the entire operation was to be on the concentration of overwhelming armored forces on narrow sectors with additional forces covering the flanks, combined with speed of execution and support by heavy air and artillery units. The deployment of attacking formations was to take place a great distance from assault positions with emphasis on operational camouflage and secrecy.



Army Group Center's 9th Army was to penetrate between the Orel-Kursk highway and railroad, and push on to Kursk. As the main spearhead drove to its objective, a supporting attack was to push far enough to the east to allow free access of this important railroad. Following the linkup with Army Group South, 9th Army and 2nd Panzer Army (also of Army Group Center) were to assist in the destruction of encircled forces. The main attack of the 9th Army was to come from the 47th Panzer Corps. It was to drive along the axis between the highway and railroad leading to Kursk and establish contact with forces pushing from the south. On the right flank of the main attack was the 46th Panzer Corps. Its mission was to seal off the Soviets inside the salient as they attempted to retreat to the west. 41st Panzer Corps, deployed to the immediate left flank of the main attack, was to push south to Olkhovatka, swing to the east and establish defensive positions. The 23rd Corps, on the extreme left of the army attack, was to pivot from its established defensive positions, secure Maloarkhangelsk and prepare a new line east of the railroad. Located on the right wing of the army, the 20th Corps initially was to hold its positions. When the expected Soviet withdrawal began, it was to attack into the salient. Army reserves were deployed directly behind 47th Panzer Corps.<sup>3</sup>

Army Group South was to breakthrough in the sector north and south of Belgorod, vigorously push toward Kursk via Oboyan, screen its eastern flank and linkup with 9th Army. The main effort was to be 4th Panzer Army, with 48th Panzer Corps on the left and 2nd SS Panzer Corps on the right. 2nd SS was to force a penetration between Belgorod and

Tomorovka, then secure the ridgeline southwest of Prokhorovka. General Hoth, commander of 4th Panzer Army, then anticipated using the SS Corps in a battle in the vicinity of Prokhorovka against approaching Soviet armored reserves. 48th Panzer Corps was to breakthrough in the area of Butovo-Cherkasskoye, pivot to the northeast and protect the 2nd SS Panzer Corps' western flank against heavy Soviet tank units believed to be in the area of Oboyan. 52nd Corps, securing the left flank of the Army, was to follow 48th Panzer and provide support.<sup>4</sup>

Provisional Army Kempf was to provide security for the right flank of 4th Panzer Army. To accomplish this, 3rd Panzer Corps was to assemble its panzer units and storm toward Korocha, then move north and assist in the impending battle at Prokhorovka. Covering the southern and eastern flanks of 3rd Panzer was 11th Corps.<sup>5</sup> Once Hoth had shattered the Soviet defenses and destroyed the approaching reserves at Prokhorovka, he planned to continue the attack toward Kursk in accordance with the issued directive.<sup>6</sup>

Deployed on the western face of the salient, 2nd Army (of Army Group Center) was ordered to tie down as many Russian units as possible west of Kursk by local attacks.<sup>7</sup> Once the two converging pincers had closed to the east of Kursk, the German command anticipated the encircled units to attempt to breakout to the east. To prevent this, 2nd Army would apply pressure by a general offensive and assist in the destruction of the captive Soviet formations.<sup>8</sup>

To complete the concept of operations once the encirclement was complete, the pocket was to be reduced as quickly as possible while forces already oriented to the east would push further in that

direction to establish new defensive positions. Hitler not only envisioned the complete destruction of the Central and Voronezh Fronts, but he fully expected to severely maul the Soviet strategic mobile reserves coming to the rescue. Success at Kursk would leave the strategic initiative once again with the Germans. When Hitler finally set the date for Citadel as 5 July, the field commands were trained to a fever pitch. Of the thirty-five infantry, eighteen panzer and two panzergrenadier divisions earmarked for the offensive, thirty-four infantry, thirteen panzer and both panzergrenadier divisions were in the initial assault.<sup>9</sup>

The Soviet plan of battle was based on superb intelligence from a high source within the German High Command and supplemented by tactical intelligence from deployed units and partisans. After determining attack positions of the main German forces, it was planned to open up a powerful barrage from all artillery and mortars, with auxiliary attacks from the air armies. The aircraft of both the Central and Voronezh Fronts, as well as neighboring fronts and long range aviation assets from Stavka, were to gain air supremacy. Voronezh and Central Fronts were to defend every position and stage counterattacks to maintain their defensive positions. Counterblows from the depths of the defense were to be organized around tank corps and armies. Once the Germans were weakened and halted, a counter-offensive was planned with the Voronezh, Central, Steppe, Bryansk, Western, and Southwest Fronts. On a strategic plane, offensive operations to the south of the Kursk salient were planned to tie down enemy reserves and prevent the Germans from shifting additional forces into the salient.<sup>10</sup>

The Soviet General Headquarters directive for the battle allocated specific missions to the Fronts. The Central Front was to defend the northern sector of the salient and wear down the attacking German forces. Upon successful completion of the defense, on order, it was to conduct a counteroffensive in conjunction with the Bryansk and Western Fronts and destroy the German forces in the Orel sector. Voronezh Front was directed to defend the southern sector of the salient and pin the German forces down. In coordination with the Steppe Front and the right flank of the Southwest Front, it was then to launch a counteroffensive and defeat the enemy in the Belgorod-Kharkov sector. This front was to concentrate its forces mainly on its left flank where 6th and 7th Guards Armies were deployed. The Steppe Front was ordered to defend behind the Central and Voronezh Fronts in a line running from Izmalkovo-Livny-the River Kshen-to Belyi Kolodez. It was to seal off any penetrations and be prepared for offensive action on order. To support the total operation, the Central Staff of Partisan Movement was directed to organize wholesale sabotage against enemy lines of communication running through the Orel and Kharkov regions, provide intelligence and prevent the movement of enemy reserves.<sup>11</sup>

To insure maximum effort by his field armies, Stalin had Zhukov remain in the north with Central Front to coordinate the actions of the Central, Bryansk and Western Fronts, where the main German effort was expected. Marshal Vasilevskii was dispatched to the Voronezh Front where he was to assist in the operations there. With Zhukov and Vasilevskii in the bulge, Stalin was emphasizing not only his concern over the impending battle, but his expectations concerning the defeat of the German offensive.

Rokossovskii, commander of the Central Front, correctly anticipated the greatest threat to be against his right flank with Model's panzers striking down the Orel-Kursk axis. To counter this, he deployed his first echelon along a fifty mile front. The 13th Army, which would bear the brunt of the attack, defended a sixteen mile front with the 29th and 15th Rifle Corps in the first echelon and a tank regiment and one Guards rifle corps, the 17th, in the second echelon. The 48th Army was deployed to the right of the 13th Army, with the 70th covering the left. Both of these armies were also organized into a two echelon defense. To support the Front, Rokossovskii held Rodin's 2nd Tank Army in the vicinity of Fatezh as a reserve echelon. The 65th and 60th Armies defended the western face of the salient on the extreme left of the front. Front reserves consisted of the 18th Guards Rifle Corps, the 9th and 19th Tank Corps, and additional antitank artillery regiments. 16th Air Army was to provide air support.<sup>12</sup>

The Voronezh Front's area was a little more complex to defend. Vatutin had decided there were three avenues of approach the Germans might use: Belgorod to Oboyan, Belgorod to Korocha, and further south Volchansk to Novy Oskol. Using this analysis as a point of departure, Vatutin organized his main strength in the center and left of his sector. The 40th and 38th Armies held the right wing of the Front, on the western face of the salient. The 6th Guards Army occupied some thirty miles covering the Oboyan approach with four Guards rifle divisions in the first echelon reinforced with one tank brigade and two tank regiments. Its second echelon consisted of a tank brigade and

three Guards rifle divisions. To the left of the 6th Guards was 7th Guards Army, assigned to defend the Korocha approach. This twenty-five mile sector was also organized into two echelons. The first echelon had four Guards rifle divisions and one tank regiment, while the second had three rifle divisions, two tank brigades and two tank regiments. Katukov's 1st Tank Army was deployed north of the 6th Guards Army covering the Oboyan-Kursk approach. The 69th Army was defending behind 7th Guards to insure the protection of Korocha. These two armies (1st Tank and 69th) constituted the Front second echelon. Reserves consisted of the 35th Guards Rifle Corps and 5th Guards Tank Corps. 2nd Air Army was Voronezh Front's operational air asset.<sup>13</sup>

The Steppe Military District, later renamed the Steppe Front, was deployed to the east of the salient. The Soviet General Staff originally intended this front to be used only for the planned counteroffensive, although its commander was told by Stalin it would be used, if necessary, for defensive purposes. To support the defensive scenario, Koniev drew up two counterattack plans, one in the direction Maloarkhangel'sk-Kursk to support the Central Front, and the other toward Oboyan-Belgorod in the south. This massive front was earmarked to be the main assault force in the counteroffensive in the Belgorod-Kharkov direction.<sup>14</sup>

The Red Army deployed one and a half times as many artillery regiments in the bulge as infantry regiments. The artillery densities were heaviest along the most likely enemy avenues of approach. On the 13th Army front, covering the Orel-Kursk rail line, there were 148 guns and mortars per mile of front. This was far more than the Germans

could muster. A total of 92 artillery regiments from Stavka reserves, consisting of over 9000 guns and mortars, were sent to reinforce the two fronts before the battle.<sup>15</sup>

The whole defensive system was designed to kill panzers. Realizing the German strength lie in their armor, while their weakness was lack of infantry, the Soviets prepared accordingly. 6000 antitank weapons were dug in, averaging 30 guns per kilometer and supported with over 400,000 mines laid on the most dangerous avenues of approach. The greatest density of mines reached 2400 antitank and 2700 antipersonnel mines per mile with the average being 1500 antitank and 1700 antipersonnel mines.<sup>16</sup>

From the opening salvo the main effort of the forward units was concentrated on destroying the German panzers in the fight for the first line of defense. All the artillery, including howitzers, rocket and antiaircraft artillery, was involved with killing enemy tanks.<sup>17</sup> The defense was to remain extremely active by massive use of counterattacks. These were carefully prepared plans at all levels with the emphasis on combined arms integration. Timing of these counterattacks was crucial; they were to be timed when the German first echelon had suffered heavy losses, the second echelon and reserves were too far away to support the lead elements and, when the artillery was displacing.<sup>18</sup> Flank strikes were stressed as the most productive.

The entire depth of fortifications at the front level exceeded 150 kilometers, while the total defensive zone came to 250-300 kilometers when the State defensive line along the Don was included. Seven complete lines of defense were established with over 6000 miles of trenchlines.<sup>19</sup>

The stage was now set for one of the most momentous battles in history. Hitler's Wehrmacht, newly equipped with men and tanks, and trained as never before, was confident of victory. Conversely, the Soviets had prepared magnificently. The difficult decision by Stalin to defend, despite overall superiority, was to pay huge dividends. German generals, although realizing the magnitude of their task, failed to grasp the full power of the Red Army at Kursk. The Red Army in the salient outnumbered the Wehrmacht almost 1.5 to 1 in men, 2 to 1 in artillery, and 1.2 to 1 in tanks at the start of the battle,<sup>20</sup> and on the main axis of advance ratios were considerably worse. Model's 9th Army faced odds of 1:2 in tanks and 6:7 in artillery, while Manstein's troops battled basically 1:1 odds in tanks, but better than 1:2 in artillery.<sup>21</sup> And if the odds were not already in the Soviets' favor, the Soviet commanders were now battle hardened and experienced, the units were tough, well trained, and they had recently tasted victory. Even the vaulted Wehrmacht would be unable to overcome these great odds.

In preparation for the assault in 9th Army's area, German sappers began clearing lanes through the massive minefields on the night and morning of 4 and 5 July. One engineer squad lifted 2700 mines in five hours of darkness without one detonation.<sup>22</sup> During these clearing operations, one Soviet patrol from the 15th Rifle Division captured a German engineer who subsequently revealed to Soviet intelligence an attack time of 0300 on 5 July.

Based on this and other intelligence, General Rokossovskii obtained permission from Zhukov to fire the prearranged artillery counterpreparation. At 0220, only ten minutes prior to the scheduled



German artillery preparation, 600 Soviet cannons, mortars, and rocket launchers, began a thirty minute attack on suspected German concentrations. The majority of fire was centered on a 20 mile sector in front of 13th Army.<sup>23</sup> Afterwards, Marshal Zhukov felt the counterpreparation could have been better organized and timed,<sup>24</sup> as the results were not conclusive. Although the barrage was fired at selected areas and not specific targets, the effect was still telling on the Germans. It disrupted command and control facilities and struck some areas of troop concentrations. Significantly, many German commanders felt it was a prelude to a preemptive Soviet attack. Beyond a doubt it caused grave consternation for the German chain of command.<sup>25</sup> A second and larger Soviet barrage was fired at 0435 with over 1000 weapons participating.<sup>26</sup>

Belatedly, the German forces regained their composure and the assault began. Luftwaffe formations began their attacks on 13th Army at 0500, and they continued in intensity throughout the day. Model's plan of attack envisioned infantry and engineers, supported by armor, pressing the attack and forcing a penetration for his panzers (Map G). In accordance with this, five infantry and elements of three panzer divisions opened the assault. 78th and 216th Infantry Divisions of 23rd Corps assaulted toward Maloarkhangel'sk, hoping to split the boundary of the Soviet 13th and 48th Armies. The tenacious Russian defenders severely punished the attacking units and progress was slow, while casualties were high. By early afternoon the attack had completely stalled. Sensing the hesitation, Red Army units launched an

immediate counterattack, pushing the 216th almost back to its starting positions.<sup>27</sup> By nightfall the only success in this sector by the Germans was the capture of the Maloarkhangel'sk railroad station, three miles into the Soviet defenses zone.<sup>28</sup>

The 41st Panzer Corps, attacking on the right of 23rd Corps, focused on the 81st Rifle Division of the 13th Army. Initially, the assaults were beaten off, however by 0830 more vigorous attacks began as the Germans recovered from the Soviet counterpreparation. Throughout the day the battle raged with the gallant 81st Rifle Division receiving air support from Front aviation assets. Minefields and antitank strongpoints took their toll on the German armor and infantry, but doggedly the Germans forced the Soviet infantry back. By late evening this Corps had secured Butyrki, and was threatening the Army second defensive belt.<sup>29</sup>

47th Panzer Corps, the main effort of 9th Army, vigorously assaulted the 15th Rifle Division. Led by Ferdinands and Tigers, the panzer corps slowly ground its way south, with Soviet infantry only grudgingly giving ground. The Soviet tactic of separating the infantry from the tanks proved correct, and German casualties mounted at an alarming rate in the attacking formations. The staunch defense, when combined with determined efforts of the infantry and antitank units, proved devastating. Eventually the 6th Infantry and 20th Panzer Divisions penetrated beyond the first defensive belt and even secured portions of the second line.<sup>30</sup> By capturing Bobrik, the Germans found themselves six miles inside the complex system.

On the right flank of the attack, the 46th Panzer Corps (made up of four infantry divisions) pressed its attack against the 132nd and 280th Rifle Divisions of the 70th Army between Gnilets and Trosna. The 7th and 31st Infantry Divisions accomplished what few German units did that day, they secured most of their assigned objectives and pushed a little over three miles into the Soviet positions.<sup>31</sup>

As Rokossovskii followed the battle, he had reason to be pleased with the fierceness with which his troops fought. By 1200 he was reasonably certain as to where the main focus of the German attack was oriented. It was not along the railway line for Ponyri, as expected, but west of it, toward Olkhovatka. He was also certain (and correct) that the Germans had not committed the bulk of their panzers. In response to the identified main attack, Rokossovskii decided to modify an already approved plan of action, and ordered his operational reserves into action. 3rd Tank Corps would move to positions south of Ponyri, 16th Tank Corps was sent northwest of Olkhovatka, while 19th Tank Corps moved to the west of the town. 17th Guards Rifle Corps was dispatched closer to the rear of 13th Army's defensive zone to stiffen the defense.<sup>32</sup> These units, plus the 2nd Tank Army and 19th Tank Corps, were to counterattack and push the Germans back to their initial positions and restore the entire system of defense.<sup>33</sup>

The 2nd Tank Army, with the attached 19th Tank Corps, assembled as directed. Unfortunately, the limited summer night prevented a thorough reconnaissance and precluded complete clearance of lanes in both Soviet and German minefields. Incomplete preparations and piecemeal commitment of units brought the counterattack to a quick halt

without accomplishing its objective. Although a failure, the movement and commitment of large armored units in essence stiffened the second line of defense to a marked degree.<sup>34</sup>

The focus of the battle of 6 July would be on the area around Ponyri, Olkhovatka and the surrounding heights, and both sides knew it. By the afternoon of the 5th, Model committed additional tank forces, including the remainder of 20th Panzer Division along with Tiger units, but he still held the bulk of his armor awaiting a penetration. By nightfall Model had cause for concern. Casualties had been enormous, there was no penetration, and most of his divisions were still fighting for the first defensive belt. Only a few Tiger and Ferdinand detachments had gone past the main Soviet positions, and they were without infantry support. These wonder weapons were now being hunted down and destroyed by Soviet killer teams, just as Guderian had predicted. The massive minefields were even stronger than originally anticipated, and the Soviet mobile sapper detachments had laid in excess of 6000 new mines in the course of the day, creating further problems.<sup>35</sup> Already on the first day the panzers had lost over 100 tanks and self-propelled guns to mines.<sup>36</sup>

That night Model decided to commit three of his panzer divisions and retain an operational reserve of two. His intention was to seize the ridgeline running 15 miles east of Ponyri and west of Olkhovatka. This key terrain was 13 miles into the Soviet defensive complex. Once secured, German forces could almost see Kursk, only 40 miles away. From there it was a downhill push to the final objective. Not only was the German commander worried about his attack for the

following day, but his intelligence officer had just informed him that there were major formations, including armor, moving towards Maloarkhangelsk, Ponyri and Olkhovatka.<sup>37</sup> Rossovoskii had also understood the importance of the ridgeline and had no intention of giving it up.

Following the failure of his first counterattack, Rokossovskii decided to strike again at first light. Although his operational reserves were stopped in the initial attempt, he was still confident the Germans could be pushed back and the first line reestablished. Accordingly, 3rd Tank Corps was ordered to maintain its positions in the vicinity of Gorodische, protecting the main road to Kursk. The remainder of the 2nd Tank Army and the attached 19th Tank Corps were to support another attack by the 17th Guards Rifle Corps to restore the 13th Army Front.

A seventy-minute artillery preparation commenced at 0350 on 6 July. As morning light dawned over the salient, hundreds of Soviet aircraft added their strength to the assault. The 16th and 17th Guards Divisions of the corps sprang to the attack at 0500 when the barrage lifted, while the 19th Tank Corps pushed to the northeast. The Guards units advanced almost two kilometers against fierce opposition before running headlong into the renewed German offensive heading south.<sup>38</sup> This new surge by the panzers forced the Soviets back to their original line of departure. Disappointing as the failure was for Rokossovskii, it was a limited success because the early morning attack had disrupted the German assault and gained another day of respite for the weary defenders. Faced again with increased German pressure, Rokossovskii

ordered the 2nd Tank Army to dig in and defend. Soviet armor was to engage the panzers from hull down positions while maneuver was strictly limited.

Rokossovskii's counterattack had struck the newly committed operational reserves of General Model's 2nd and 9th Panzer Divisions. These two divisions had concentrated their strength on a narrow six mile sector from Ponyri to Soborovka.<sup>39</sup> When the 250 tanks and assault guns of these units met 2nd Tank Army's T-34's, a melee of enormous proportions developed, only to be dwarfed several days later by the battle on the Voronezh Front.

Frustrated by its lack of success, the German 23rd Corps once again launched further attacks in a futile attempt to capture Maloarkhangelsk and secure the eastern flank of the penetration, but the proud 78th "Assault" Division and its sister unit, the 216th Infantry Division, had already spent themselves. Exhaustion, and the previous days casualties, prevented any success in this sector. Had the attack around Ponyri been successful, this might have proven crucial as the 23rd Corps was to defend against Soviet operational reserves coming from the east. Realizing the futility of further assaults, Model ordered the corps to go over to the defense.<sup>40</sup>

Meanwhile, the 41st Panzer Corps' advance resembled the carnage and devastation, as well as lack of success, of World War I battles. By now the full weight of 18th Panzer Division had been brought to bear, but to no avail. The success of the previous day in capturing Butyrki could not be exploited.

Model's greatest chance of success came in the area in front of Gnilets. When the 15th Rifle Division was forced back, Model felt the Soviets were ripe for the "coup de main," hence he committed his three panzer divisions. This was the force Rokossovskii's counterattack encountered. 2nd Panzer Division, reinforced with a Tiger battalion, made the best progress. Its assault carried it through Soborovka and onto the high ground just north of Olkhovatka. Here the attack stalled when it clashed with dug in elements of the 2nd Tank Army. Attack and counterstrike for the critical high ground proceeded for the next four days, both sides realizing the significance of this terrain.<sup>41</sup> 9th Panzer Division made little progress when committed, while sustaining heavy casualties.

46th Panzer Corps, striving to protect the right flank of the main attack, pushed headlong into the thick woods to the west of Gnilets. As the 7th and 31st Infantry Divisions closed with the 290th and 132nd Rifle Divisions in the foreboding terrain, a wild death struggle followed. This battle, too, continued to rage for several days. As with the eastern flank of the attack, the Soviets remained steadfast and inflicted massive casualties on the German infantry.<sup>42</sup>

As the battle continued for the high ground along the Teploye-Olkhovatka-Ponyri axis, Rokossovskii requested additional reinforcements. However, due to the pressure on the Voronezh Front, Stalin rejected his plea. Forced with this dilemma, Rokossovskii pulled units from uncommitted sectors of his Front to reinforce his hard pressed 13th Army. One rifle division came from 60th Army and two tank regiments were moved from 65th Army.<sup>43</sup> By the end of 6 July,

Rokossovskii's 13th Army and 2nd Tank Army were holding six German infantry and three panzer divisions at bay. German casualties were now over 25,000 killed and wounded with 200 tanks and self-propelled guns lost. The deepest penetration was only six miles deep, and the climax of the battle was fast approaching north of the village of Olkhovatka.<sup>44</sup>

Zhukov, though concerned, had reason to be pleased. Although casualties had been heavy, the Germans had suffered even worse. After two days of hard fighting, the Germans had failed to make a penetration and they had already committed most of their operational reserves.

As the hot July sun rose over the northern face of the salient, Model's 9th Army focused its new assaults on the twenty mile front between Ponyri and Teploye. At 0820, following a heavy artillery preparation, the 18th, 9th, 2nd and 20th Panzer Divisions massed over 300 tanks for yet another push to the south. 18th and 9th Panzer struck out toward Olkhovatka; 2nd and 20th Panzer pushed toward Molotychi; while another assault group attacked toward Ponyri.<sup>45</sup> This critical juncture between the Soviet 13th and 70th Armies continued to be the focus of the struggle in the north. Following heavy fighting the Germans succeeded in opening a 300 meter gap west of Ponyri at dusk, only to see it closed by a Soviet counterattack. Hand to hand fighting was the order of the day as the German panzers and grenadiers struggled against the massive antitank defenses.

In response to the continued German pressure, Rokossovskii pushed a steady stream of reinforcements into Olkhovatka and Ponyri, especially heavy artillery units. As more panzers were committed to



the fray, additional Soviet hunter-killer teams responded to the threat. Late in the day 300 panzers, led by the 4th Panzer Division, broke through in the vicinity of Samodurovka, only to be halted by Rokossovskii's reserves.<sup>46</sup> Under the cover of the short summer night, the Soviets deployed two additional rifle divisions, three mechanized brigades and one artillery division to stiffen resistance around Samodurovka.<sup>47</sup>

41st Panzer Corps succeeded in securing the northern portion of Ponyri early on 9 July, but the Soviet defenders turned the remainder of the village into a mini-Stalingrad, fortifying every building. To the west, Model had committed a total of six panzer and three infantry divisions to take the last high ground around Olkhovatka. In desperation, Model launched four major attacks throughout the day, failing in each attempt. At 0800 20th Panzer launched a determined attack against Samokurovka, without success. 4th Panzer passed through 20th Panzer, pressing the attack and captured the town. By late afternoon, this division had captured Teploye, forcing the Red Army defenders back to their last defensive positions on the ridgeline. Sensing victory, 47th Panzer Corps threw the 2nd and 9th Panzer plus the 6th Infantry Divisions into the attack. By late evening, these five divisions had launched no less than thirteen assaults.<sup>48</sup> The climax for the Germans in the north had been reached, but Model's piecemeal commitment of his panzers had given Rokossovskii time to react. Although the battle for this ridgeline raged for three more days, the Germans had failed. Hard pressed though the Soviets were, the battle had been fought according to their plan.

On 9 July, Model requested additional reinforcements from Field Marshal von Kluge, commander of Army Group Center. Kluge released the 10th Panzer Grenadier Division, 36th Motorized Division and the 8th Panzer Division. The 10th PGD and 8th Panzer Division were thrown into the battle for the ridgeline, achieving little. Soviet counterattacks against the 41st Panzer Corps terminated any further offensive action of the Germans. Again on 10 July, Soviet counterattacks against 23rd Corps and 41st Panzer Corps indicated the growing strength of the Soviets that spelled doom for the German attack. By that evening, the commander of 47th Panzer Corps told Model that in face of the growing Soviet strength and lack of German success, further offensive action was impossible.<sup>49</sup>

Against this advice, Model ordered one last assault from the 4th and 20th Panzer Divisions in a desperate bid for the forbidden ridgeline. To no one's surprise, the attack failed. Sensing total victory, Rokossovskii ordered additional counterattacks against the German 23rd Corps and Ponyri. Only the timely intervention of the newly committed 10th Panzer Grenadier Division, with its seven artillery battalions, stalled the Russians.<sup>50</sup> Dejected though von Kluge was over the failure to make a breakthrough, more alarming were reports of an impending Soviet offensive north and east of Orel. On 11 July, 9th Army was ordered to go over to the defensive. The final act in the north came on 12 July when the last reinforcements approaching the battlefield, 12th Panzer and 36th Motorized Divisions, were ordered north to seal off Soviet penetrations.<sup>51</sup> This was an ignominious end to the ill-fated venture in the north.

Prior to the initiation of the opening assault in the north against the Central Front, a prelude to the main battle in the south was fought. 6th Guards Army, along with most other Soviet units of the Voronezh Front, had occupied the dominant high ground in its sector. By occupying this key terrain, the Soviets denied the Germans observation into the complex defensive system. This was particularly important for the units of 48th Panzer Corps and 2nd SS Panzer Corps. In order to gain adequate observation for their artillery, these units planned limited attacks to secure the dominating ridgelines, thus denying the Russians an advantageous position while giving the German artillery observers their first look in depth at the Soviet defenses. When Zhukov was informed of these attacks on 4 July, he felt they were only designed for reconnaissance purposes and did not appreciate the full intent.<sup>52</sup>

At 1450 on the 4th, the attack was heralded by Stuka aircraft striking the slopes around Gertsovka and Butovo (Map H). This was followed by a short but intense artillery preparation at 1500. As the barrage lifted, stormtroopers from 48th Panzer and 2nd SS Panzer Corps sprang to the assault. While 48th Panzer struck out toward Gertsovka and Butova, Hitler's "Black Guards" stormed Yakhontovo and Streletskoye.<sup>53</sup> Troopers from 11th Panzer and Grossdeutschland Panzer Grenadier Divisions captured Butovo without severe casualties, but 3rd Panzer Division was roughly handled in taking Gertsovka. Despite heroic resistance, 71st Guards Rifle Division was forced back by the heavy concentration of German forces. When the SS jumped off to the attack just before dusk, the 67th Guards and 52nd Guards Rifle

Divisions fought them as if possessed, but they were no match for Hitler's elite, backed by massive amounts of tanks. By nightfall, all four towns were in German hands, and both panzer corps were rushing artillery and observers to the ridgeline in preparation for the main attack the next morning.

At 2230, Chistiakov, commander of 6th Guards Army, ordered a short artillery counterpreparation of five minutes duration to be fired.<sup>54</sup> Although the "fire strike" was far from conclusive, it temporarily disrupted German assault preparations. As with the barrage in the north, this preparation was fired only at known artillery positions and suspected troop concentrations. By 2400, Vatutin knew that the Germans had overrun the combat security elements of two Guards divisions.<sup>55</sup> If there was any doubt as to the location, time, or intensity of the coming attack, these limited attacks now dispelled it. In accordance with prearranged plans, Vatutin now sanctioned a huge preemptive artillery barrage. His barrage was organized using the artillery from 40th, 6th Guards, and 7th Guards Armies and was concentrated in front of 6th Guards Army.<sup>56</sup>

Late that night while both armies made final preparations for the battle, a violent thunderstorm broke over the salient and quickly turned the roads into quagmire. This was to have devastating consequences in the days to come for the panzers as they attempted to maneuver about the battlefield.<sup>57</sup> Tanks would become immobile, thus becoming easy prey for Soviet antitank guns. Although a nuisance for the Red Army, it little affected the defensive scheme of maneuver.

Throughout the night, 6th Guards Army mounted continuous counterattacks against the recently lost high ground. The heaviest assaults were mounted against the 332nd Infantry Division on the left flank of 48th Panzer Corps. Although the Soviets gained no ground, they placed the 332nd in a difficult position.<sup>58</sup> Prior to the beginning of the German assault in the morning, Vatutin authorized Chistiakov to fire yet another thirty minute preemptive barrage. The combined weight of the 6th and 7th Guards artillery pulverized suspected troop concentrations. Despite the brevity of the attack, it caught the Germans off balance, causing heavy casualties in the assault formations, although not as severe as Rokossovskii's attacks.<sup>59</sup> According to Soviet sources, this preemptive strike delayed the German attack by one and a half hours.<sup>60</sup>

The German barrage began at 0330. This massive artillery preparation, the largest ever fired by the Wehrmacht in the war, lasted for one and a half hours, and even the Soviets were taken back by the intensity. The elite SS units began their attack at 0430, following closely on the heels of the artillery barrage. 48th Panzer Corps followed suit thirty minutes later unleashing over 700 tanks in groups of 50 to 100 against the 6th Guards Army. Massed armor strove to overwhelm the dense Soviet defensive system by sheer weight of numbers. Once through, Hoth intended to engage the Russian reserves in open battle, using superior maneuver to defeat the Red armored forces.<sup>61</sup>

From the beginning of the attack the infantry divisions on the left flank of 48th Panzer Corps had a difficult time. As the 332nd and

255th Infantry Divisions attacked elements of the 71st Guards Rifle Division, their progress was slow while casualties were high. The commanders were repeatedly ordered throughout the day to push the assault forward regardless of cost, but the results were disappointing. Only a few kilometers were gained in this sector.

3rd Panzer Division stormed forward under the cover of the aerial assault of the Stukas. Early in the day, this division completed the capture of Gertsovka, then reorganized and pushed northward. Despite heavy fighting and Soviet counterattacks, 3rd Panzer ground on, securing Korovino by dusk. Some elements even pushed as far as the Pena River. By nightfall these panzers had penetrated up to six miles within the Soviet defenses, destroying the first line of defense.<sup>62</sup>

GrossDeutschland PGD was reinforced with Lauchet's Panther Brigade of 200 new Panther tanks for the assault, bringing this massive tank force to well over 380 tanks plus assault guns. Unfortunately, the new Panther brigade's performance was extremely disappointing. Shortly after the attack began, this unit ran into an undiscovered Soviet minefield and lost 36 tanks before engineers cleared the area.<sup>63</sup> Despite this setback, the grenadiers stormed forward toward Cherkasskoye at precisely 0500 . By 0915 the town was under assault. To reinforce the success of the grenadier regiments, the commander of GrossDeutschland decided to shift the Panther brigade to the Cherkasskoye area. Bad luck continued to plague this unit, and while redeploying, the whole unit became bogged down in muddy fields left by the rainstorm. Even without this potential reinforcement, the proud

grenadiers pressed their attack and captured Cherkasskoye by nightfall.<sup>64</sup>

Stride for stride, 11th Panzer Division kept up with GrossDeutschland. Butovo was secured by the late afternoon, the flanking maneuver assisting the grenadiers in capturing Cherkasskoye. By dusk, 11th Panzer tanks were pushing northeast of the town, up to eleven miles inside the defense. By late on the night of 5 July 48th Panzer Corps had secured all of its first days objectives and although not spectacular, results were promising.<sup>65</sup>

The SS Panzer Corps fought against an old adversary, the 52nd Guards Rifle Division. Both sides knew what was at stake, and fighting was exceptionally fierce in this sector. For the elite of both armies, little quarter was asked or given. Heavy Luftwaffe support assisted the massed panzers in forcing their way through the first defensive belt by 1200, and reaching the second line by evening. Once again, although a penetration was not made, the Soviet defensive plan was sufficiently flawed to allow such incursion into the main defenses.<sup>66</sup>

In the area of Army Detachment Kempf, the assault met with much less success. Kempf's assault units were caught in a Soviet counterbarrage by thirteen artillery regiments, and suffered heavy casualties. 3rd Panzer Corps struggled throughout the day attempting to cross the Donets River, but only modest gains were secured against fanatical resistance. The 168th Infantry Division, on the left flank, attacked from a previously established bridgehead, making no progress. Due to this failure, 16th Panzer Division, which was supporting the crossing, could not be committed as planned. 19th Panzer Division,

attacking in the center of the corps, was pounded extensively by Soviet artillery and air and sustained tremendous losses. The only success for this hard pressed corps was enjoyed by 7th Panzer Division, which crossed the Donets quickly and established a bridgehead. By late afternoon the corps commander ordered 6th Panzer to follow the 7th Panzer, while 168th Infantry and 19th Panzer Divisions were instructed to continue their attacks following a night redeployment further south.<sup>67</sup> To a large degree, the failure of the first and subsequent days of this army was due to the gross lack of air support. The vast majority of air of Army Group South was dedicated to 4th Panzer Army. Throughout the battle, wherever the panzers were supported by air, success followed. However, whenever air support was lacking, as in Kempf's area, progress was slow or nonexistent.

As Vatutin followed the development of the first day of battle, he could not have been happy. Manstein's tactics of using massed panzers from the opening had forced penetrations upwards of 12 miles deep. Although Soviet units contested every position doggedly and the normal panic had not occurred, the defense was shaken by the weight of the attack. By late morning Vatutin had decided that Oboyan was the main German objective and that the assaults toward Korocha were only supporting attacks.<sup>68</sup> As units throughout the main defensive zone counterattacked continuously against lost positions, at 1640 Vatutin ordered the 1st Tank Army to move the 6th Tank and 3rd Mechanized Corps to cover Oboyan, and to prepare to counterattack towards Tomarovka at dawn on 6 July. 5th Guards and 2nd Guards Tank Corps were directed to concentrate to the east of Luchki to attack toward Belgorod against 3rd Panzer Corps. By 1940 Vatutin had also ordered three divisions of the



35th Guards Rifle Corps to reinforce 7th Guards Army to cover the Korocha approach. 7th Guards Army commander, Shumilov, was ordered to counterattack and destroy all Germans east of the Donets. Additionally, the 27th Army, originally earmarked for the Central Front, was ordered by Stalin to proceed directly to the Voronezh Front. Already on the first day the situation was critical in this area.<sup>69</sup> Throughout the night the Soviets redeployed, while tanks of 1st Tank Army moved up behind the second defensive line and dug in to meet the German onslaught.

Vatutin's planned counterattack for 6 July was cancelled after 1st Tank Army commander, Katukov, convinced him it was best to leave the tank units in a defensive posture.<sup>70</sup> One major reason for this change was the losses the Soviet tank formations had suffered in the battles of maneuver so far. When the tanks were dug in and worked in close coordination with antitank guns and infantry they inflicted severe casualties on the panzers. No doubt this decision was also influenced to take advantage of the Russian soldiers' tenacity when defending a fortified position.

Throughout the day, the Germans continued their advance, although without the previous day's successes. In the 48th Panzer Corps area, the assault began anew when over 250 bombers pounded the 67th Guards Rifle Division. When the aircraft turned away, German tanks and grenadiers punched a hole in the final defensive line, forcing the Guards back to the north.<sup>71</sup> To maintain the momentum of the panzer corps, the Luftwaffe flew over 1700 sorties.<sup>72</sup> 167th Infantry Division made the best gains of the day by seizing Dmitrievka. While GrossDeutschland PGD pushed toward Dubrovo,

3rd Panzer Division expanded its positions along the Pena, clearing isolated pockets of resistance.

Brutal fighting continued between the SS and its tough Guards adversary. 2nd and 5th Guards Tank Corps, which had recently deployed in the vicinity of Luchki I and II. These tank corps repulsed eight assaults<sup>73</sup> before the SS splintered the defense. By noon Luchki I fell to the Germans and put them twenty miles deep in the defensive zone. Despite this, as the SS advanced, a problem arose. Because of the lack of success by Army Detachment Kempf, the right flank of the SS was exposed, causing concern for the German command.<sup>79</sup>

In an effort to protect this flank, Kempf began massing his three panzer divisions for a push toward Prokhorovka, leaving only the 106th and 320th Infantry Divisions to cover his own eastern flank against possible attacks by the 7th Guards Army. To alleviate the shortage of infantry, Kempf also ordered the 198th Infantry Division to move north.<sup>75</sup> Frustrated, 3rd Panzer Corps repeatedly threw itself against the Soviet defenders, but progress was still painfully slow. By that evening, 4th Panzer Army and Detachment Kempf were in complete control of the Soviet first line of defense.

In an overly-optimistic report to Stalin that evening, Vatutin reported the Germans had lost 332 tanks and 80 planes. In response, the Supreme Commander reminded Vatutin success in his battle of attrition was a prerequisite for the planned counteroffensive. Additionally Stalin approved a request for more reinforcements. Marshal Vasilevskii, Stalin's representative, proposed moving the 2nd and 10th Tank Corps into the Prokhorovka area as reinforcements, plus

commitment of the 5th Guards Tank Army from the Steppe Front to Stary Oskol for future use. Koniev violently protested this piecemeal utilization of the reserve front he commanded. He advocated only the massed employment of this force when committed, but Koniev was overruled by Stavka.<sup>76</sup>

Fully realizing the decisive battle would be fought against Hoth's 4th Panzer Army, the Soviet command had reason to worry. The first defensive line had been lost, penetrations of up to 20 miles had been made, 6th Guards Army had been mauled, and almost the whole of the operational reserve had been committed by the third day of battle. Not only had the Germans maintained heavy offensive pressure, but they had repulsed all Soviet counterattacks. With Hoth controlling well over 600 Tigers, Panthers, Mark IV's and self-propelled guns, the outlook was not cheerful. Nikita Krushchev visited Vatutin's headquarters and told him, "The next two or three days will be terrible...We must take care to see that they break their necks."<sup>77</sup>

7 July continued badly for the Soviets. At dawn GrossDeutschland PGD captured Dubrovo from 3rd Mechanized Corps while 11th Panzer Division cut the Kursk-Belgorod highway. Lauchert's Panther Brigade, still supporting GrossDeutschland, again blundered into a minefield and sustained heavy casualties. After two days of fighting, this unit, from which so much was expected, had lost 75% of its strength to mines and mechanical trouble.<sup>78</sup> 2nd SS Panzer Corps with 400 tanks stormed Luchki II, tore apart the 51st Guards Rifle Division front and continued to press to the north. That evening, the Germans captured Tetervino, the last major village before Prokhorovka.

Two major events of importance then took place. In the afternoon, Hitler ordered half of Hoth's air support sent north to assist Model's army. Without this support, Hoth's advance slowed significantly. Beyond a doubt this was 4th Panzer Army's trump card. Without German air superiority, Soviet resistance stiffened, and even more heartening for the hard pressed Guardsmen, Soviet aircraft now swept over the battlefield to strike the panzers without mercy. Secondly, as the SS and Kempf moved north, a gap developed between the two forces. When Vatutin spotted this gap, he ordered his second echelon reserve, the 69th Army, into the gap to defend. Both these events would haunt the Germans as the battle continued.<sup>79</sup>

Vatutin now felt he must strike at the exposed flanks of the Germans in an attempt to slow the panzers. Two attacks were planned, the 40th Army in the west was to strike northwest of Tomarovka, while another force in the east was to attack north of Shopino against Kempf's 3rd Panzer Corps. Orders were issued at 2300, but hopes were not high for success.<sup>80</sup> Previous counterattacks had been costly and ended in failure.

As 40th Army massed forces for the counterattack, the feeling of optimism must have been missing. Most of Moskalenko's tanks and artillery had already been shifted to 6th Guards and 1st Tank Armies; consequently, the attack fell primarily on the shoulders of the unsupported infantry. Regardless, the attack began at 1000, making little headway. Most disappointing of all was the fact it did not affect the main German attack which jumped off at 1100. Hoth had massed 500 panzers from three panzer divisions on a 4 mile sector

astride the Belgorod-Kursk highway. Within an hour this force had ripped open the junction between 3rd Mechanized and 31st Tank Corps and was thrusting toward Sukho-Solotino.<sup>81</sup>

Vatutin's second counterattack in the east was based on the 2nd and 5th Guards Tank Corps. As this force struck the German right flank a heavy battle developed, forcing Hoth to weaken his main effort in response to this threat. Although little ground was gained, the German attack toward Oboyan was weakened and the defenders held.<sup>82</sup> The 6th Tank Corps of 1st Tank Army mounted an additional attack against GrossDeutschland PGD, however, in a short time 35 out of 40 T-34's were destroyed, blunting the attack.<sup>83</sup>

4th Panzer Army continued to pound 6th Guards Army unmercifully throughout 9 July. Progress was steady, but without the massive Luftwaffe support they had enjoyed previously, the panzers and grenadiers made no spectacular gains. By late afternoon, Verkhopenye was captured and the Pena River reached. Under cover of artillery, the Germans secured a small bridgehead on the northern side of the river and beat back several weak Soviet counterattacks.<sup>84</sup> Farther to the northeast, 11th Panzer Division attacked Kochetovka, forcing 6th Guards Army Headquarters to displace into 1st Tank Army sector. This forced displacement under heavy pressure had a disheartening effect on the Guardsmen. About the same time, reports were arriving with alarming news of some forward units panicking under German pressure. Crisis loomed for the 6th Guards Army, and only drastic measures could prevent a complete collapse.<sup>85</sup>

Vatutin ordered Katukov to launch a counterattack on the following day with the 6th and 10th Tank Corps in a bid to slow the German momentum and to give 5th Guards Tank Army time to reach the battlefield. This tank army was conducting forced marches to cover the 250 miles distance to its new assembly areas northeast of Prokhorovka. Its forward elements began arriving late on 9 July, but were in no condition to be committed to action despite the desperate plight of their comrades. Remembering Stalin's dictum to hold the Germans and prevent a penetration that would allow the panzers to be unleashed, Vatutin began formulating plans for a massive counterattack with 5th Guards Tank Army, 5th Guards Army, 1st Tank Army, and 6th and 7th Guards Armies, to begin on 12 July.<sup>86</sup> Considering the losses and failures of the last several days, it was ambitious as well as desperate.

As the hot July sun rose over the salient on the 10th, Manstein and Hoth were still confident of victory. Losses had been heavy, but not crippling, and the Soviet defensive system had been severely damaged, particularly in the 6th Guards Army sector. Signs of panic in the Guardsmen had been evident, giving the impression of a possible total collapse. With the commitment of 1st Tank Army primarily against 48th Panzer Corps, Hoth felt his plan was succeeding. As long as 48th Panzer could keep 1st Tank Army tied down south of Oboyan, Hoth would be free to send his SS formations against the approaching strategic reserves in the vicinity of Prokhorovka. The only question remaining was, when would Kempf's 3rd Panzer Corps linkup with Hausser's SS Panzer Corps? Once these two corps joined, Hoth was confident they

would destroy the approaching 5th Guards Tank Army, opening the way for a continued drive to Kursk.

GrossDeutschland Panzer Grenadier Division crossed the Pena River and surprised elements of the 6th Tank Corps. A sharp tank battle raged with the panzers exacting a heavy toll from the Soviets. Farther to the east, 11th Panzer Division was stopped completely when 10th Tank and 3rd Mechanized Corps counterattacked. Throughout the day heavy fighting seesawed back and forth as the Red tankers sought to seize the initiative, but by the end of the day the Soviets were forced to withdraw farther north, allowing the panzers to continue their advance. With this success, Hoth was ready to launch the second phase of his plan, the total destruction of the approaching Soviet tank forces. He began massing his SS formations for their drive toward Prokhorovka and the decisive battle. To support this maneuver, "Totenkopf" Panzer Division crossed the Psel River to the west of Prokhorovka, while SS "Liebstandarte" and SS "Das Reich" divisions assembled for the push to the east.<sup>87</sup> While the SS made preassault movements, 48th Panzer Corps prepared to renew its advance toward Oboyan. Its mission was to occupy 1st Tank Army and prevent its commitment against the main effort. This attack was also part of Hoth's deception plan to make the Soviets continue to think the main attack was striving for Oboyan. With Kempf continuing his attacks against 7th Guards and 69th Armies, Hoth anticipated 2nd SS Panzer Corps to be free to deal with 5th Guards Tank Army. When 3rd Panzer Corps arrived on the battlefield, the panzers would outnumber the Soviets and victory would follow.

Vatutin realized the decisive moment of battle was fast approaching. In his last conversation, Stalin had clearly stated what was expected of the hard pressed defenders, and indicated failure would not be tolerated. Rotmistrov's tank army, as well as 5th Guards Army had been subordinated to Voronezh Front. 5th Guards Tank Army was moving into position northwest of Prokhorovka, but the arrival was painfully slow. Zhadov's 5th Guards Army had entered the threatened sector and was deploying into defensive positions by the morning of 11 July. Additional support was forthcoming in the form of 27th Army (originally earmarked for Central Front) and 4th Guards Tank Corps. These units were to defend the city of Kursk. 53rd Army and 4th Mechanized Corps were directed by Stalin into the salient with orders to defend the sector southeast of Kursk. Within a week the defensive strength of the Voronezh Front had almost doubled, and still the Germans had not been stopped.<sup>88</sup>

Soviet intelligence identified the German regrouping and Vatutin surmised the possibility of a thrust toward Prokhorovka. When he briefed Stalin on the situation on the night of the 10th, Vatutin told the Supreme Commander he felt that since the German drive toward Oboyan had been blunted by the day's counterattacks, the enemy would switch their effort toward Prokhorovka in an attempt to bypass 1st Tank Army. In ensure success, the Germans would have to weaken their flanks, giving Vatutin an opportunity to counterattack with the objective of cutting off the forces striking both Oboyan and Prokhorovka. As Stalin listened, Vatutin outlined a bold plan to destroy the Nazi spearheads.



Vatutin proposed a massive five-army counterattack. 5th Guards Tank Army would attack from its assembly areas southward toward the SS in Prokhorovka, to the Pokrovka-Yakovlevo-Bykovla line. 5th Guards Army would strike toward the south and southwest, assisting the tank army. 6th Guards Army and 1st Tank Army would combine for a drive for Yakovlevo, while 7th Guards Army would attack from its present positions to the west with the objective of freezing the German east flank. The overall objective was to encircle, then destroy, the major assault formations attacking the front. To give weight to the main attack, 5th Guards Tank Army was reinforced with the 2nd Tank and 2nd Guards Tank Corps, giving it a total of 850 tanks. This army was organized into two echelons, 500 tanks in the first and 350 in the second. Almost half of the first echelon comprised light tanks, while only 35 were heavy.<sup>89</sup> Stalin approved the plan and final preparations were made.

In concept, this was an excellent plan; but, in reality, there were serious flaws that Vatutin overlooked or choose to ignore because of Stalin's expectations. The German drive to Oboyan had not been stopped. Although the counterattacks had delayed the drive, 48th Panzer Corps was far from stymied. 6th Guards and 1st Tank Army had both been severely punished by the continuous German pressure, and although signs of panic in the 6th Guards Army had subsided, the causes had not been rectified. 5th Guards Tank and 5th Guards Armies were still moving into their defensive positions and assembly areas following three days of forced marches. Finally, and most significantly, Soviet intelligence on the dispositions of the German formations was far from complete.

As rainstorms began anew on 11 July, Army Detachment Kempf jumped off from its assault positions with 3rd Panzer Corps determined to break the Soviet defenses and make contact with the SS pushing to the east. The fighting was bloody from the beginning, both sides realizing the outcome if 3rd Panzer Corps linked up with the SS. By 0900 48th Panzer Corps renewed its own advance toward Oboyan. Thirty minutes later Hausser's panzers struck out for Prokhorovka.

All day heavy fighting progressed throughout the southern face of the salient. 1st Tank and 6th Guards Armies once again were forced to withdraw as 48th Panzer pushed them away from their jump off positions for the scheduled counterattack. By late evening the SS had broken through at Storozhevoe, threatening the rear of 5th Guards Tank Army as it assembled for the counterattack. Only desperate fighting stalled the Black Guards and thwarted their attempt to seized Prokhorovka. 3rd Panzer Corps' progress was slow but steady. By nightfall, Kempf's leading units were on the banks of the northern Donets, only 12 miles from Prokhorovka and the last major obstacle before the town.<sup>90</sup>

Clearly, the climax of the battle for Voronezh Front was fast approaching. It was a race against time for both adversaries. 5th Guards Tank Army was rapidly concentrating its forces on the stretch of land between the Psel and Donets rivers, preparing to launch its counterattack, while Kempf was urging his panzers to bridge the 12-mile gap and combine the weight of his panzers with that of Hausser's. The triple German attack of 11 July had severely disrupted Vatutin's planned counterstrike. 1st Tank, 6th and 7th Guards Armies had been

forced out of position, while 5th Guards Army arrived too late to lend its weight to the attack as planned, and would be unable to fully participate. This left only 5th Guards Tank Army to go it alone. The flanking attacks would not materialize, leaving only a head on clash between Stalin's Guardsmen and Hitler's SS. Late in the day Zhukov arrived at Voronezh Front and together with Vasilevskii, assumed overall control of operations. The decision was made to continue with the planned attack, albeit with only one army. To support the attack, Zhukov assembled ten artillery regiments with the sole mission of killing panzers.<sup>91</sup>

Fully cognizant of the importance of the linkup, 3rd Panzer Corps initiated its attack of 12 July in the hours of darkness by seizing a bridgehead across the northern Donets in a surprise raid at Rzhavets.<sup>92</sup> For a few hours it appeared that Kempf might effect the long awaited linkup. Intense fighting immediately developed following the crossing as 69th and 7th Guards Armies savagely defended every position. As the panzers slugged their way into the town of Rydinka, elements of 5th Guards Tank Army were sent south to halt the Germans. The commitment of the 5th Guards Mechanized Corps along with the 26th Tank Brigade,<sup>93</sup> was just sufficient to delay Kempf's units from breaking through. All day long the battle raged as the Soviet command agonized over the possible linkup. Although this was a peripheral battle, when viewed in comparison with the tank cauldron at Prokhorovka, it was the key to success. Without Kempf's three panzer divisions to influence the major battle, the Soviets outnumbered the SS. Kempf failed in his mission; as a result, Prokhorovka did not go as Hoth and Manstein envisioned.

Because of the pressure exerted by Kempf, Zhukov moved up the Soviet counterattack by two hours. A 15 minute barrage heralded the 5th Guards Tank Army attack. 850 Soviet tanks moved to the attack in an area southwest of Prokhorovka. At almost the same time, Hausser's 600 SS tanks commenced their assault in the opposite direction. 1500 tanks and assault guns thundered at each other. As Rotmistrov's Guardsmen deployed, he ordered his units to close with the enemy as fast as possible. Only by disrupting and intermingling with the panzers could the Soviet tanks compete. At close range, the size of the guns and strength of armor protection meant little; only speed and numbers would count. Pursuant to orders, the T-34's and light tanks sprang forward at full speed, intent only on closing with the enemy. Paralleling the Psel River, 5th Guards Tank Army deployed from Petrovka to Belenikhino.<sup>94</sup> The moment of decision had arrived.

The initial blow of the Soviet assault forced the SS onto the defensive. Following orders, Soviet tankers broke the German formations and a free-for-all quickly developed. As the battle raged, it was impossible to determine who was attacking and who was defending. Equally intense as the tank battle, the struggle for the air raged all day with the air forces from both sides striving to help their comrades.

29th Tank Corps collided with "Totenkopf" and "Leibstandarte" in some of the heaviest fighting that raged throughout the day. 2nd Guards and 2nd Tank Corps charged out of Belenikhino into the village of Kalinin, forcing the Germans to defend most of the day.<sup>95</sup> As this particular fight developed, 2nd Guards Tank Corps slid to the south and

exerted continual pressure in the gap between the SS and Kempf's panzer divisions, causing alarm for the German command. Since Kempf was not in position to protect this flank, Hausser was forced to divert forces to prevent a breakthrough. By midday, the SS were on the defensive along the entire front, struggling to contain 2nd Guards Tank Corps in particular.

Hoth arrived on the battlefield in early afternoon. Shortly after his arrival he was informed of the failure of Model's attack in the north; however, he still felt that if Kempf arrived in time with his panzers, Hausser's assault would succeed. Victory was still within reach, but time was running out. When informed that Kempf was stalled, but continuing to press heavily, Hoth ordered Hausser to press his own attack. Kempf would surely arrive in time. By 1500 the SS returned to the attack, forcing Rotmistrov onto the defensive.

About the same time, Rotmistrov committed the last of his reserves, the 10th Guards Mechanized Corps and the 24th Guards Tank Brigade. The struggle continued with the Soviets bending, but not breaking. As the sun descended over the southern face of the salient, the issue was undecided. In the late evening, the final battles were fought near Polezhev and the "Voroshilov" Sovkhoz. By 2100 the sounds of battle subsided and 5th Guards Tank Army withdrew from the field to establish defensive positions. Exhausted, the SS defended where they stood.<sup>96</sup> Without 3rd Panzer Corps, victory eluded Army Group South.

As pillars of long, black smoke hung over the battlefield, signifying the intensity of the 18-hour struggle, Hoth sensed failure. Kempf did not arrive, and the SS had lost over 300 tanks and assault

guns without achieving a breakthrough. Although Soviet losses were approximately equal, Rotmistrov still possessed close to 500 tanks.<sup>97</sup> The Germans would try again, but the offensive might of the panzers had been broken. Koniev later described the battle as "the swan song of the German armor." <sup>98</sup>

In what turned out to be a sideshow, 48th Panzer Corps' attack toward Oboyan on the morning of 12 July failed. From the beginning, GrossDeutschland and 3rd Panzer Divisions, both already exhausted, were continuously harrassed and counterattacked by elements of 1st Tank and 6th Guards Armies. Both divisions were nearly encircled during these counterattacks, and only succeeded in withdrawing at the last moment. In the afternoon, a heavy Soviet assault regained Berezovka and settled the question of any further German offensive action in this sector.<sup>99</sup>

The failure of the SS at Prokhorovka signaled the end of the Kursk offensive for the Germans. Heavy fighting continued for several weeks before the Soviet counteroffensive was launched. On the 13th, Hitler summoned his commanders from the Kursk area for a conference. At the meeting, Hitler informed the generals of the Allied landings in Sicily and the ensuing collapse of the Italian defense. At any moment, he fully expected the Anglo-American forces to launch further attacks on the Italian mainland. As a result, he ordered the termination of Citadel. Model and his superior totally agreed with the decision based on the recent Soviet counteroffensive in the Orel area. Manstein violently disagreed, still believing the German offensive in the south could secure victory. Whether this belief was based on wishful thinking or misinterpretation of the results of the battle at

Prokhorovka, it is doubtful if any continuation of the German attack would have produced the results Manstein anticipated. Hitler acquiesced, allowing Manstein to continue, but ordering preparation for the withdrawal of the 2nd SS Panzer Corps for commitment to Italy, in essence killing any chances of success for Manstein. Limited attacks were subsequently launched, without positive results. Eventually, Kempf did close the gap between himself and the SS, and parts of 69th Army were destroyed, but now it was the time for the Soviets to exact their revenge.

On 24 July, Zhukov launched his counteroffensive toward Belgorod and Kharkov. Many weeks of hard fighting followed before Kharkov was liberated. With the capture of Kharkov and Orel to the north, the battle of Kursk came to a close. The Red Army possessed the strategic initiative and kept it until its triumphant march into Berlin a little less than two years later.

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77. Caidin, The Tigers Are Burning, p. 203.
78. Thach, The Battle of Kursk, July 1943, pp. 289-294.
79. Carell, Scorched Earth, p. 59.
80. Erickson, The Road to Berlin, p. 104.
81. Ibid., p. 104.
82. Parotkin, Battle of Kursk, 1943, p. 102.
83. Thach, The Battle of Kursk, July 1943, p. 295.
84. Carell, Scorched Earth, p. 65.
85. Erickson, The Road to Berlin, p. 105.
86. Jukes, Kursk: The Clash of Armor, p. 100.
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88. Erickson, The Road to Berlin, pp. 105-106.
89. Ibid., p. 106.
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92. Carell, Scorched Earth, p. 77.
93. Thach, The Battle of Kursk, July 1943, p. 319.
94. Erickson, The Road to Berlin, p. 109.
95. Ibid., p. 110.
96. Thach, The Battle of Kursk, July 1943, p. 321.
97. Ibid., p. 322.
98. Jukes, Kursk: The Clash of Armor, p. 103.
99. Thach, The Battle of Kursk, July 1943, p. 322.

## CHAPTER IV

### ANALYSIS OF THE BATTLE

The main thrust of this study is to assess the Red Army's employment of armored and mechanized operational units in the deliberate defense at the Battle of Kursk. Initially, as the battle is analyzed it appears the Soviets were quite successful in every aspect, albeit with some difficulties. Obviously, the Red Army was victorious in as much as it defeated the Nazi blitzkrieg and inflicted horrendous losses on the Wehrmacht. Victory in itself, however, does not necessarily correlate with proper methods of employment. One could successfully argue that the Wehrmacht defeat was as much the result of German miscalculation as Soviet military prowess. The key to victory lay in the Soviet massed employment of their armored forces, but the question is, did the Soviet Army in a doctrinal sense correctly employ these units before and during the defensive phase of the battle? To answer this question, first we will look at the prebattle disposition of these forces, analyze their employment during the battle, and finally compare this with their professed doctrine.

The operational armored forces on the Central Front (Map I) consisted of the 2nd Tank Army (3rd and 16th Tank Corps) and the 9th and 19th Tank Corps. As previously stated, Rokossovskii, commander of the Central Front, had only one avenue of approach into his sector, the ridgeline followed by the Orel-Kursk railroad. Although restrictive at times, this avenue of approach allowed maneuver room for a large force of German armor to move directly against Kursk. By using this avenue

of approach the Germans could seal off any Soviet units in the salient and strike directly at Kursk.

Rokossovskii deployed 2nd Tank Army directly behind 13th Combined Arms Army, which was responsible for defending the most threatened sector, the forementioned ridgeline. By doing this, Rokossovskii accomplished several tasks: he provided defense in depth along the most critical avenue of approach; consequently, the tank army was already in position to defend should the situation dictate. Should 13th Army hold the German assault, the 2nd Tank Army would be well placed to launch a massive counterattack to throw back the German panzers; and if the 13th Army was only partially successful, the tank army would be able to reinforce the defense if required.

19th Tank Corps, part of the Front reserves, was deployed to the west of 2nd Tank Army, thus allowing its commitment in several ways. It covered the road from Orel to Kursk that paralleled to the east the ridgeline that supported the railroad. As a secondary avenue of approach, it was critical and required additional protection. Additionally, this corps was in position to support 2nd Tank Army should it be committed in defense or counterattack. This support could be in the form of attachment or mutual support in joint operations.

9th Tank Corps was located in the vicinity of Kursk. From here, this corps could defend Kursk from the north, or south, or it could be committed directly into the defense. 2nd Tank Army and 19th Tank Corps were also in position to work in conjunction with the 17th Guards Rifle Corps, part of the 13th Army second echelon, and the 18th Guards Rifle Corps, of the Front reserve.

The Voronezh Front sector was more difficult to defend, having three avenues of approach in its area. The main avenue of approach ran from just west of Belgorod through Oboyan and then a little east of Kursk. The secondary avenues of approach were from Belgorod to Korocho, and just south of Belgorod to Novyy Oskol. The Lipovyi Donets was basically the boundary on the east of the main avenue of approach which forced the Germans due north to Oboyan, before shifting to the northeast to terminate just east of Kursk. The secondary approaches were important for the possibility they offered the Wehrmacht to outflank the bulge much further to the east, negating the elaborate defenses in the salient.

To protect the most dangerous avenue, Vatutin deployed his 1st Tank Army just south and west of Oboyan. As part of the Front second echelon, it protected this vitally important area by supporting the 6th Guards Army. 3rd Mechanized Corps was deployed south of Oboyan; 6th Tank Corps occupied positions to the southwest of the town, while 31st Tank Corps was even further west. In essence this tank army did not straddle the main avenue of approach as did its sister unit in the north. From this location, 1st Tank Army was free to follow several courses of action: it could be employed in defensive positions directly behind 6th Guards Army to prevent a penetration in the Front defensive sector; it could counterattack along the main avenue of approach meeting the panzers headon; it could counterattack due south, swing to the east, hitting the German assault in its flank; or it could simply reinforce the 6th Guards defense. All of these were viable options allowing extreme flexibility in the hands of a bold, determined commander.

For its part, 5th Guards Tank Corps, part of the Front reserve, was deployed northeast of Oboyan. This powerful force could also be used in a variety of roles. From its central location it could respond to threats on any of the avenues of approach. By being in the center of the Front sector, it could strike at the flank of an assault launched toward Korocha, or Novyy Oskol. Additionally, it could be sent to cover the vital land bridge between the Psel and Donets area in the vicinity of Prokhorovka.

2nd Guards Tank Corps occupied positions just east of Korocha. From its location, it is obvious its primary mission was to defend the town and the approaches further east. Its deployment behind 69th Army allowed Vatutin time to develop the situation sufficiently prior to commitment of this reserve asset. Additionally, 2nd Guards Tank Corps was in position to strike in the flank any German force attacking Oboyan.

Vatutin's operational employment of his tank army and separate tank corps prior to the battle allowed him tremendous flexibility. He covered all avenues of approach; the most dangerous by a tank army and the secondary by a tank corps, while another tank corps was free to be committed as required. It is worth noting that Vatutin did not initially employ any operational armored reserves to cover the land bridge between the Psel and Donets rivers.

As just described, it is evident from the prebattle dispositions that the two Soviet commanders had correctly analyzed the avenues of approach into their defensive sectors and had deployed their tank armies and corps in locations that would allow them to respond to

a variety of threats by the Wehrmacht. The presence of a tank army deployed behind each front's main defensive positions increased the overall operational depth of troop deployment from 50-70 kilometers. Even more notable was the fact that these tank armies and corps were located in positions sufficiently in depth that would allow freedom of maneuver as long as the main defensive positions held firm.

Beyond a doubt, the Soviet dispositions of their tank corps and armies were adequate and well thought out. To meet the blitzkrieg tactics of the panzers, the Red Army was echeloned in depth, organized around strong antiarmor defenses, and supported by strong armored and mechanized forces. Armored units were effectively placed prior to battle to support the defensive scheme of maneuver and allowed commanders to retain maximum flexibility. Let us now analyze how these tank armies and corps were actually employed during the initial seven days of battle.

From the beginning, Rokossovskii intended that Central Front, and the 13th Army in particular, defeat Model's 9th Army forward of its main defensive positions.<sup>1</sup> Although this turn of events did not materialize, Rokossovskii still greatly benefited from Model's tactics of attempting to force an infantry penetration preparatory to commitment of the panzers in force. As heavy fighting developed throughout the day on 5 July, it became evident to the Soviets where the German main attack was oriented. By late afternoon, the German 47th Panzer Corps had penetrated beyond the first defensive belt and had even secured portions of the second line.



Equally apparent to Rokossovskii was the fact that Model had not committed the bulk of his armor; consequently, it was obvious he was using his infantry divisions, supported by limited panzers to force a penetration. Based on these facts, and proceeding from his desire to hold the Germans forward of his main defensive positions, Rokossovskii decided to commit 2nd Tank Army (two tank corps) and the 19th Tank Corps as well. The concept was simple; these units were to attack to the north and reestablish the first defensive belt of 13th Army.<sup>2</sup> At first glance this appears to be the wrong decision, because by attacking due north, these units were striking at the heart of the German main assault force.

Without detailed Soviet sources, only logic can explain why Rokossovskii ordered this attack as he did. At this stage of the battle in the north, in the sector of 47th Panzer Corps, only the 6th Infantry Division and a portion of the 20th Panzer Division had been committed. Late in the afternoon Model committed the remainder of 20th Panzer Division in an attempt to force a penetration. This piecemeal commitment of German panzers allowed the Soviets to react in sufficient time by maneuvering units to blunt any penetration. With only two divisions (both heavily reduced by severe fighting) to deal with, Rokossovskii had good reason to believe swift commitment of his own tank army would achieve the desired result of reestablishing his main defensive positions. His units had been in the area for sometime, they were familiar with the terrain, the plan was simple, and the lead German units were exhausted.

With three tank corps involved in the counterattack, the tank army could have mustered somewhere between 400-500 tanks. Confronting this massive force, 18th and 20th Panzer Divisions probably had between 200-250 panzers. This is a conservative estimate that assumes the divisions were up to strength prior to battle and takes into account the casualties sustained on 5 July. These figures would have given 2nd Tank Army close to a 2 to 1 advantage in tanks when it began the assault. Additionally, the Soviet armored forces had not been engaged in heavy fighting throughout the day. All of these factors, on the surface at least, make an excellent case for Rokossovskii's counterattack and prospects for success.

As described in Chapter 3, the Soviet counterstrike quickly became disjointed and units were committed piecemeal. One can easily imagine a newly formed tank army, without proper reconnaissance, attempting to bull its way through massive minefields late in the evening. Although not disastrous, the results were disappointing. Undeterred, the still confident Rokossovskii ordered another counterattack for the morning of 6 July, only this time with only two of his three tank corps in conjunction with the 17th Guards Infantry Corps.

Unfortunately for the Central Front, this new assault ran headlong into two newly committed panzer divisions. What might have been successful in the late evening of the 5th, prior to Model committing additional panzer divisions, met an avalanche of German armor moving south. At the conclusion of this massive tank battle, the Wehrmacht remained on the field of battle, while the Red armored

formations withdrew to defensive positions, where they basically remained until the Germans began to withdraw at the conclusion of their northern offensive. This was the extent of Rokossovskii's use of his operational reserves. Obviously he succeeded in defeating Model's 9th Army, and subsequently participated in the Soviet counteroffensive.

Despite Rokossovskii's success, the use of his tank army and the 19th Tank Corps is subject to question. Prebattle dispositions, along with the depth of deployment of his operational tank army, allowed Rokossovskii flexibility he failed to use. He had identified the location of the main German attack and also correctly surmised the Germans had not committed the bulk of their armor. By committing his counterattack against the 47th Panzer Corps, he must have realized he was eventually going to clash headon with the main German strength. There can only be two explanations for this: he may have felt by launching his forces late on 5 July he would be able to restore his main defensive positions and preempt the commitment of the following panzer divisions, or he intended to meet force with force in a bloody battle of attrition.

By pushing the Germans back to their assault positions, Rokossovskii would force the panzers to fight for the same ground twice. To accomplish this, timing of the counterattack was critical, while the execution would have had to have been flawless. As evidenced by the lack of success, the timing or execution, perhaps both, were deficient. Additionally, as this was the first time the Soviet tank army had been used, it is doubtful if the 2nd Tank Army was even capable of such a complex operation.

Conversely, a battle of attrition, in its purest form, was not the ideal method of employment of the tank army either. Rokossovskii's mission also included moving to the offensive as soon as the opportunity arose subsequent to blunting the German attack. This would evidently lead to the conclusion that Rokossovskii envisioned maintaining as much of his armored strength as possible. Despite this, his primary mission was to destroy the German armored strength forward of his main defensive positions. Since he was obviously unable to accomplish this, he was forced to commit his operational armored units, but was he forced to commit them to a head-on collision with the known strength of Model's 9th Army?

If we accept the premise that the initial option was too formidable a task for 2nd Tank Army to accomplish, was there another alternative to attacking in a frontal assault? There probably was: by striking the western, or eastern flank of 47th Panzer Corps. The prebattle disposition of the operational reserves allowed 2nd Tank Army and 19th Tank Corps freedom to maneuver sufficiently to either the east or west to attack the flanks of the panzer corps. By committing the tank army to a frontal assault, Rokossovskii forfeited any operational advantage he possessed and committed his operational reserves to a tactical battle. Although successful in the end, the Central Front owed success more to numerical advantage and attrition than to the correct employment of the operational reserve.

Operations in the Voronezh Front sector contrasted significantly with events in the north. Manstein and Hoth realized the old tactics of forcing a penetration with infantry, then following up

with panzer divisions would not work in this situation because of the massive strength of the defenses. Consequently, the Germans committed their panzers in mass, attempting to overwhelm the Soviet defenses. Despite massive casualties, 4th Panzer Army was successful in breaching the 6th Guards Army main positions to a depth of 12 miles on the first day.

By noon, Vatutin felt that Oboyan was the focus of the main German attack. In an attempt to stymie 4th Panzer Army, late in the afternoon of 5 July, Vatutin ordered 1st Tank Army to counterattack towards Tomarovka. This town lay almost astride the boundary between 48th Panzer and 2nd SS Panzer Corps. From its positions west of Oboyan, 1st Tank Army was in an excellent position to move south then southeast, striking 48th Panzer Corps on its western flank.

Katukov, commander of 1st Tank Army, however, convinced Vatutin it was preferable not to counterattack, but to move 1st Tank Army astride the avenue of approach south of Oboyan.<sup>3</sup> By doing this, Vatutin tactically committed his operational tank army as did his neighbor to the north, only with less desirable results. No doubt Vatutin felt justified in his decision, realizing what effect the loss of Oboyan would have on his ability to defend. However, by committing 1st Tank Army to the tactical defense, he forfeited his ability to maneuver at the operational level and he was reinforcing his lack of positional success. More importantly, though, he lost his ability to regain the initiative.

As 6th Guards Army and 1st Tank Army struggled to halt the avalanche of panzers pushing from the south, Vatutin ordered another

counterattack for 8 July. This time 2nd Guards and 5th Guards Tank Corps were to strike from their assembly areas in the east hitting the German exposed right flank in an effort to relieve pressure on the hard pressed Oboyan sector. In a spirited attack the Guardsmen threw themselves at the panzers. So heavy was this pressure, Hoth was forced to weaken his drive on Oboyan to blunt the Soviet counterattack.

It is interesting to note the German reaction to this two-corps attack. At this stage of the battle, the Germans had driven an armored wedge 25-30 kilometers deep and 30-35 kilometers wide at the base. Despite severe losses, the Germans now possessed sufficient room for maneuver on the battlefield. The main focus of 4th Panzer Corps remained Oboyan, with Hoth straining every fiber to reach the Psel River. As the 2nd Guards and 5th Guards Tank Corps struck the German eastern flank, the last thing Hoth wanted to do was weaken his main effort. However, this attack forced the Germans to respond to the threat by weakening the drive toward the Psel. Duplicate situations on the battlefield seldom exist, but one cannot help but wonder what might have been the results if Vatutin had ordered 1st Tank Army to strike the western flank of 4th Panzer Army instead of stagnating in a positional defense and reacting to German initiatives. When viewed from the perspective of the success achieved by the two tank corps in the east, a strong case for this option could be made.

With the commitment of the 2nd Guards and 5th Guards Tank Corps along with 1st Tank Army, Vatutin no longer possessed any operational armored reserves, although 5th Guards Tank Army was rushing to his aid. About this time Vatutin struck on the idea of a massive

coordinated counterstroke with all of his forces in conjunction with the approaching strategic reserves. As stated previously, it was a bold plan, but no longer feasible on the scale Vatutin envisioned. Without operational reserves on hand to seize the initiative, the Soviets were forced simply to react. As a result, the center of the Voronezh Front was forced out of position and 5th Guards Tank Army carried the brunt of the much reduced counterattack around Prokhorovka.

Tank armies were first used by the Red Army in this battle. The most effective means of using these tank armies were still in question, and the Soviet commanders were searching for the ideal method of employment in defense when the Kursk battle erupted. The 1936 Soviet Army Field Service Regulations did not address tank armies simply because they did not exist at that time. These regulations, however, explained in great detail the concept of defense at division and below. The emphasis on strong antiarmor defense is striking.<sup>4</sup>

As the war progressed, the Red Army's doctrine for handling large armored formations evolved out of experience, with "necessity being the mother of invention." By July 1943, the Soviets had not only mastered the challenges of organizing large tank units, but their prebattle disposition as well. Without question, the Central and Voronezh Fronts commanders had effectively deployed their tank armies and corps. From their assembly areas, these units could have responded effectively to any threat posed by the German advances. Based on detailed Soviet knowledge of the Wehrmacht's concept of operations, this was a foregone conclusion.

Without specific field regulations to guide them, the Soviet Front commanders had to decide on the correct employment of their tank armies. Assigned missions for the battle left no doubt that every inch of terrain was to be defended tenaciously, while the defense was to remain active through the adroit use of armored forces.<sup>5</sup>

The 1944 Field Service Regulations afford insight on how the tank and mechanized corps were to be employed. The chief mission of the tank corps was the destruction of the enemy infantry, and in the defense it was to counterattack from the depths of the defense against enemy armored units that had penetrated the main defensive positions. The mechanized corps were assigned the same counterattack mission in defense. The field regulations were quite specific on the employment of these corps, obviously extracted from hard-won experience at the hands of the German panzers. Further, in the regulations the roles of the reserves are elucidated by stating, "reserves are established for repulsing unexpected enemy blows, especially on the flanks and sector joints."<sup>6</sup>

Based on the deployment and subsequent use of the tank armies, both Vatutin and Rokossovskii attempted to use their tank armies in a fashion similar to the way they would use tank and mechanized corps. Rokossovskii deployed his tank army and tank corps in depth to allow flexibility in maneuver, and committed these forces to repulsing 9th Army's tactical penetration. Although Vatutin also correctly deployed his tank army and tank corps, his employment of these forces was faulty. When 4th Panzer Army penetrated his defense, he failed to



counterattack with his tank army, and only stiffened his shaken 6th Guards Army. However, the commitment of the 2nd Guards and 5th Guards Tank Corps paralleled the doctrine stressed in the 1944 Field Service Regulations.

Although the 1936 Field Service Regulations shed little light on how the operational armored reserves should have been employed in the battle, the 1944 Field Service Regulations clearly show how doctrine had evolved at the time of the struggle in 1943. Tank and mechanized corps were to be employed in the counterattack role in an effort to destroy enemy penetrations.<sup>7</sup> Although not specifically addressed, tank armies obviously were intended to be used in a similar fashion. Based on this assumption, we can assess the results of the employment of the Soviet tank and mechanized units.

Rokossovskii evidently intended to employ his tank army and corps in accordance with what was becoming accepted practice and what later became doctrine. What could be argued is that his execution may have been faulty. By attacking into the teeth of the approaching panzers, his counterattack was bound to fail. Vatutin, on the other hand, disregarded the correct use of his tank army; and instead of counterattacking as he originally intended, left his tank army in a positional defense and forfeited the advantages obtained by counterattacking. Whatever his reasons, he flaunted what seems to have been the approved solution. When he finally committed the 2nd Guards and 5th Guards Tank Corps in the east, the results (although disappointing) proved the validity of the counterattack concept.

#### ENDNOTES, CHAPTER IV

1. Parotkin, Ivan, ed. Battle of Kursk, 1943, p. 154.
2. Ibid., p. 154.
3. Ibid., p. 88.
4. Field Service Regulations, Soviet Army 1936.
5. Parotkin, Battle of Kursk, 1943, p. 169.
6. RB 20-19, Selected Readings in Military History: Soviet Military History, pp. 351-352.
7. Garthoff, Raymond L. Soviet Military Doctrine, p. 169.

## CHAPTER V

### IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY

Soviet military writers continually stress the importance of the Battle of Kursk to the development of the Soviet art of war. Lessons learned range from the tactical level to the strategic. General S. Ivanov, chief of staff of the Voronezh Front during the battle, felt the foreknowledge of German plans and unit dispositions was one of the most important factors of success for the Soviets.<sup>1</sup> Beyond a doubt, this knowledge influenced the Soviet defensive scheme of maneuver and was a principal contribution to the Red Army victory at Kursk. Once enemy plans are known, it is a relatively simple task to devise a method to thwart them, albeit the execution may fall short of expectations. Having analyzed the Soviet employment of tank and mechanized corps as well as tank armies, it is important to put this knowledge in proper perspective. The intention here is not to list lessons learned by the Red Army, as informative as they would be, but to extract useful information on the employment of Soviet Tank and mechanized corps and tank armies. Initially, the discussion will stress the nature of the present Soviet defense doctrine and the role of tank armies in this concept. This will be followed by an analysis of the basic tenets of the U.S. Army AirLand Battle doctrine with a view to applying lessons learned from the Kursk battle. The final segment of this chapter will include general observations on Kursk's implications for today.

Kursk, as well as other defensive battles in World War II, has given the Soviets a wealth of knowledge regarding defensive operations. The Soviet philosophy is that defense is a temporary state of affairs leading to the resumption of offensive operations. In a prepared defense, such as was used at Kursk, the Soviets seek to weaken the enemy preparatory to launching a massive offensive. On a broad scale, modern defensive doctrine at front, and even army level, stresses defense in depth oriented around clusters of antitank strongpoints. The defense is dependent on stubborn resistance by motorized infantry formations and backed by strong counterattacking tank-heavy forces. This is the basic pattern successfully established at Kursk.

For the first time in the Great Patriotic War, the Red Army was capable of massing tremendous forces in a relatively small frontage as well as tremendous depth. The sheer depth and strength of the defense made a penetration by the panzers virtually impossible. By denying the panzer divisions access to the operational depth of the defenses and by not allowing the Germans freedom to maneuver throughout the depth of the battle area, the Red Army stripped the panzers of the key to victory. The Soviet concept of a prepared defense remains virtually the same today. Although the Soviets realize that the advent of nuclear weapons prevents the massing that occurred in World War II, the concept of a stubborn defense in depth based on antitank strongpoints is still prevalent.

The emphasis on the counterattack from the depths of the defensive area by large armored formations is also directly related to Kursk. The Soviets employed tank armies for the first time at Kursk.

As already discussed, problems arose which the Red Army failed to rectify during the battle; however, this should come as no surprise. Formulation of tank armies on the eve of battle obviously implies many teething problems: command and control, communications, and the lack of experience, to mention a few. However, despite these problems, the Soviets fully realized the implications of massed armor in battle. Beyond a doubt, the Soviet Army of today is familiar with difficulties inherent in the employment of tank armies. Defensive doctrine stresses the use of tank armies in the counterattack role.<sup>2</sup> Kursk witnessed the successful birth of this doctrine. The problem is not to wonder how the Soviets intend to use their tank armies in the defense, but to wonder how successful they are at implementing this doctrine. The doctrine appears sound, and Kursk proved beyond a doubt its validity in blunting blitzkrieg style assaults.

The key to defeating the prepared Soviet defense is to defeat it operationally. By denying operational depth to the Wehrmacht, the Red Army denied the Germans victory. The importance of this is not lost on the Soviet Army of today. The operational depth of the defense is vital. It was the tank and mechanized corps and tank armies that denied the panzers the freedom to wreak havoc within the operational area. The tank armies of the fronts will attempt to accomplish the same purpose. The obvious intent is to have the defending motorized infantry strip away the punch of the attacking armored units, leaving them vulnerable to a counterstrike.

Modern Soviet doctrine, as did World War II doctrine, stresses the importance of counterattacking the flank of an attacking enemy.

Conceptually this is a simple task, while in reality it is most difficult. With the exception of the counterattack of 2nd Guards and 5th Guards Tank Corps, all Soviet counterattacks clashed head on with the Germans. Whether through design or ignorance, direct collisions usually produced less than optimal results. By the Soviets own admission, the 5th Guards Tank Army counterattacked with little knowledge of German dispositions. This is a significant point. To identify an assailable flank is critical as well as difficult. Logic would dictate that sound intelligence is crucial in identifying the long sought after open flank. To carry the argument further, it would be apparent that depriving the Soviets of this capability would be necessary. Intelligence on todays battlefield is capable of collecting data at an ever increasing rate; however, there is no substitute for hard tactical intelligence to assist the commander in making a decision on when to commit his operational reserve. Successful denial of this information may well prevent the Soviet commander from employing his tank army when and where it is most needed.

Realization of how the Soviet Army intends to use its tank armies in counterattacks in support of a prepared defense serves as a start point to analyze methods of disrupting their employment. By understanding ways that a Soviet commander may use these armies we can then proceed to "enter his decision making cycle" to defeat his plans. The concept of the massed armored counterattack into a flank of an opposing enemy is valid, thus requiring a well thought out concept in order to defeat the intent of the Soviet commander. Studying the evolution of the use of the tank army in defensive battles from Kursk to the present promises large dividends.

Timing of counterattacks is crucial, but difficult to execute with precision. When Rokossovskii committed 2nd Tank Army in the Central Front area, his initial attack was timed to allow restoration of his main battle positions prior to the commitment of the bulk of Model's panzer divisions. As stated before, the concept and timing was correct, while the execution was faulty. When to commit tank armies to counterattacks will continue to remain a salient question. If precious resources are launched too early then the full impact will not be felt by the enemy, because the enemy formations will not be eroded sufficiently to be vulnerable to counterattack. Conversely, if the counterattack is committed too late, an intact assault force may well already be wreaking havoc in the operational depth of the battle area.

Determining the correct time of commitment for the tank army is a decision based on intelligence and experience. Realizing the importance of the function of this tank army, it is imperative the U.S. Army effectively counter its commitment. Little can be done to affect the experience of a Soviet commander; consequently, denying the required intelligence is vital. Much lip service is paid to deception, electronic emissions, and screening flanks. However, if we are to defeat the timing and location of the counterattack these factors must be dealt with in a realistic and viable manner. The deep battle concept has gone a long way to suggest methods of disrupting the all-important timing of an operation; however, commanders must realize their efforts must be augmented by all means available within the main battle area.

Tank armies reflect a highly mobile concept with massive firepower potential. Consequently, it is easy to understand the thrust of the counterattack from the depths of the defense. The importance of this concept was understood by the Soviets prior to Kursk; however, on the Voronezh Front, Vatutin completely failed to take advantage of this mobility. One can only surmise why Vatutin forfeited this valuable asset. A major consideration might be that the Soviets felt inadequate in a mobile battle against the Germans. The importance of this is that modern Soviet doctrine is similar in many ways to that at the time of Kursk. Perhaps there was doubt and hesitation in the mind of the Soviet commander at the crucial moment. As a result, 1st Tank Army failed to counterattack and remained on the defense until the German attack ran its course. In the fast moving battlefield of today, hesitation by the commander over when to counterattack may well lead to defeat.

The basic tenets of the U.S. Army AirLand Battle doctrine, as described in FM 100-5, Operations, are initiative, depth, agility, and synchronization.<sup>3</sup> To understand better the importance and mutual relationship of these tenets, we must focus our attention on their relationship to Soviet operational doctrine. By understanding the evolution of Soviet defensive concepts and how tank armies have been used in the past, then we can better understand the rationale for their use now. Taking this one step further, by viewing the battle of Kursk while using our basic tenets as guide, one can gain more insight into the rationale for these tenets.



Plans at the operational level of war must be made 48-72 hours in advance. At first glance, the tenet of initiative appears to be an elusive object. The concept of offensive spirit is simple enough to grasp, and it is easy to relate this spirit to retention of initiative. At Kursk, both antagonists strove to seize the initiative at the operational level: the Wehrmacht in the attack and the Soviets in the counterattack. Today the Soviets emphasize the same intention.

Seizing and retaining the initiative implies having to deal effectively with the inevitable tank army counterattack when penetration of the main defensive position is accomplished. Tactically defeating the Soviets without winning operationally will probably spell defeat. In attacking a prepared Soviet defense, the operational plan must focus on breaking into the operational depth, thus allowing freedom to maneuver without interference from large Soviet counterattack forces. Obviously, this means that planning and execution must focus on the tank army. Without successful destruction or disruption of this army, the Soviet defense will be victorious.

Additionally, retention of the initiative will allow U.S. forces freedom to maneuver. This is critical. From a historical perspective, the Soviet Army has always excelled in battles of attrition, and there is little reason to doubt their success in future battles of this sort. If our forces lose the ability to maneuver and must resort to attrition, such as the Germans did at Kursk, the results would be catastrophic. One should never lose sight of the fact that the Red Army was extremely successful at Kursk as well as other defensive battle in making the transition from massive battles of

attrition to large scale offensives without an operational pause. To forget this would be to ignore the history of Soviet operations in World War II.

The advent of nuclear weapons as well as increased mechanization has undoubtedly caused the depth of the battlefield to expand. Soviet doctrine stresses depth in defense to allow operational reserves the flexibility to maneuver when necessary. The employment of the 1st and 2nd Tank Armies at Kursk lacked as much depth as is desirable today; however, it was sufficient if the desire to maneuver demanded it. Depth on the battlefield can mean many things. However, space and time are the most important. Without adequate space for the tank army to maneuver and deploy, its vast potential cannot be brought to bear. Time, or lack of it, may well restrict the depth of the battlefield. By restricting the amount of time operational reserves have to function, the depth of the battlefield will be reduced. Premature commitment implies a lengthening of space, while delayed commitment implies shortening of the battlefield. Denying time to the tank army in operational reserve will be difficult, but possible. The operational plan must focus on using a combination of denying space as well as time to shape the battlefield for successful operations.

Agility as defined in FM 100-5 is akin to flexibility. The key phrase describing this tenet is "avoid enemy strengths and attack enemy vulnerabilities." The Red Army in the Great Patriotic War sought the same objective. In defense, infantry and artillery were to defeat the panzers while Soviet tanks were to attack and destroy softer targets.

The idea is simple: focusing Soviet strengths on German weakness. As with many other simple ideas, execution was found to be more difficult. At Kursk, both tank armies were thrown into the breach against the panzers. Strength met strength and massive casualties resulted. Despite the victorious conclusion for the Soviets, the point remains that their doctrine stressed a salient point, however in practice it fell far short of expectations.

As discussed previously, there were many reasons for the faulty employment and execution of counterattacks at Kursk when the operational reserves were committed. The main implication is that when experienced Soviet commanders were faced with a most difficult situation, they resorted to a battle of attrition with their armored reserves as opposed to finesse. Agility is a state of mind as well as organizational flexibility. It would be wrong to draw the conclusion that Soviet commanders lack agility and boldness from this one episode on the eastern front. But, it is instructive to analyze the reactions of these Soviet commanders when faced with extreme pressure. This battle is an example of an elaborately prepared and well rehearsed defense organized in depth and supported by strong operational armored reserves. The prerequisite for bold, powerful counterstrikes by massive armor was present, but command agility was lacking.

Rokossovskii's commitment of 2nd Tank Army to its counterattack to restore his main defensive belt is an excellent example of the difficulties in achieving synchronization. Timing of counterattacks is crucial, and all assets must be used to focus maximum power in this thrust. Every effort must be made to maximize the potential for

success as well as catching the enemy unaware. Seeking enemy weakness is vital, while attacking his strength will result only in stalemate and attrition. Under the force ratios the U.S. Army will face in a conventional war, this point is significant. There is much discussion of shaping the battlefield to facilitate a successful counterattack, and the concept seems valid. In the heat and confusion of battle this will be a tremendous task. From an operational aspect, molding the battlefield will require strong leadership. Rokossovskii's counterattack showed how the level of expertise and timing is crucial.

The Battle of Kursk provides a wider range of implications than just the operational employment of tank armies and corps. We must always be mindful that the Soviets view the defense only as temporary, a prelude to offensive operations. From its inception, Kursk was planned as a prelude to a huge counteroffensive. Front commanders had to plan for a dual mission, defense and counteroffensive. The U.S. Army would do well to remember this point whenever the Soviets prepare to defend. Throughout the war, the Soviets maintained this doctrine and continually strove to implement it. Essential aspects of doctrine remain the same.

One final consideration must be addressed. This is the perception of sluggishness often associated with the Soviet Army. However, the Kursk battle testified that the staff work, organization, and overall responsiveness of the Red Army was excellent. Although the German plan was generally known from the beginning, foreknowledge should not detract from the tremendous achievements of the commanders and staffs at all levels. Comprehensive plans based on lengthy

wargames were evidenced by contingency plans for most situations. Beyond a doubt this flexibility and thoroughness demonstrated a marked degree of professionalism rarely attributed to the Russians. Subsequent operations for the remainder of the war refined this proficiency. Participants in any conflict with the Soviet Army in Europe should expect the Soviet commanders to be competently served by well trained staffs.

#### ENDNOTES, CHAPTER V

1. Parotkin, Iven, ed. Battle of Kursk, 1943, pp. 149-160.
2. FM 100-2-1, The Soviet Army: Operations and Tactics, p. 6-1.
3. FM 100-5, Operations, pp. 2-1 - 2-3.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSIONS

Kursk was the turning point of the war on the Eastern Front in World War II. Hitler lost the strategic initiative for good, while Stalin and his Red Army dictated the flow of events for the remainder of the war. From the standpoint of this paper, it is important to understand that Kursk witnessed the birth of the Soviet tank army as we know it today. The tank army was a natural evolution from the tank and mechanized corps. Conceptual employment of this operational force in the defense was based on experience with the tank corps. Understanding how the modern Soviet Army intends to use its tank armies in defense should begin with a study of the first successful employment of this force in battle.

From an operational perspective, the Red Army did an excellent job of positioning their tank and mechanized corps and the 1st and 2nd Tank Armies. From prebattle dispositions, these units could respond to any situation the Wehrmacht thrust on them. Their locations provided depth to the battlefield, allowed freedom of maneuver, and represented the potential for flexibility.

Rokossovskii handled 2nd Tank Army with much more determination than his counterpart in the south, General Vatutin. However, both commanders failed to maximize the potential of the tank armies. Counterattacks were launched against German strengths and not their weaknesses. By clashing with the panzers head on, the active defense

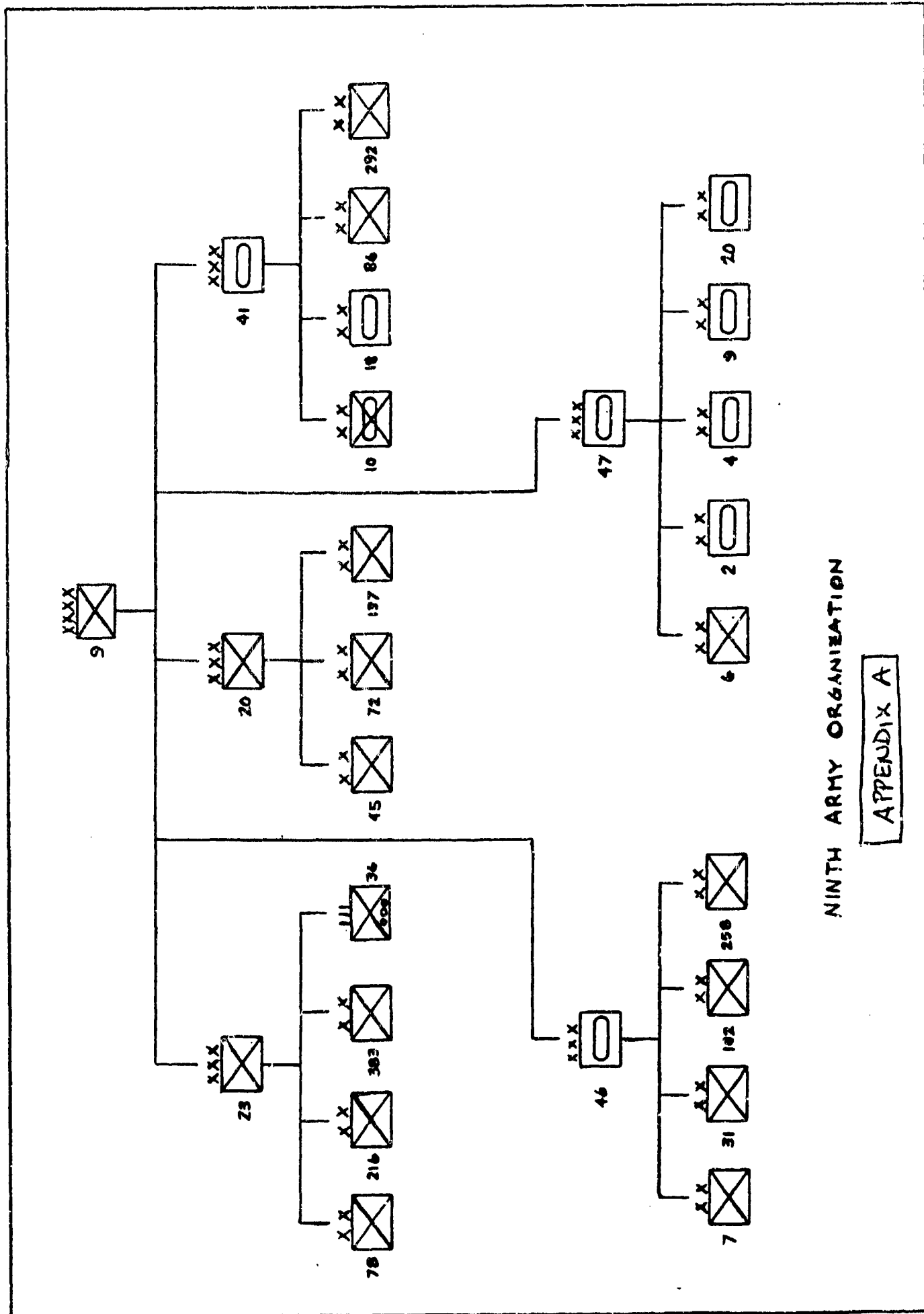
at the operational level quickly degenerated into a tactical battle of attrition. Despite the victorious conclusion for the Soviets, this was not the correct use of their operational reserves.

Kursk offers an excellent example of the difficulties associated with timing and synchronization of counterattack at the operational level. When viewed from the AirLand Battle perspective, this is a valuable lesson. The U. S. deep battle concept and its relationship to the battle along the forward line of troops is based on timing.

Soviet doctrine is based in significant part on successful experiences from the Great Patriotic War against Nazi Germany. The Soviets are justly proud of their accomplishments at Kursk and feel there are many direct applications from lessons learned in this heroic battle. The Red Army demonstrated competent staff work, superb planning, staunch determination, and sound defensive doctrine at Kursk. There is a movement afoot in the U.S. Army to study Soviet military history, and this is a step in the right direction. Studying successful Soviet operations will give a much needed understanding of their doctrine. By following the evolution of Soviet doctrine, the U.S. Army will have a better gauge in determining how successful its AirLand Battle will be.

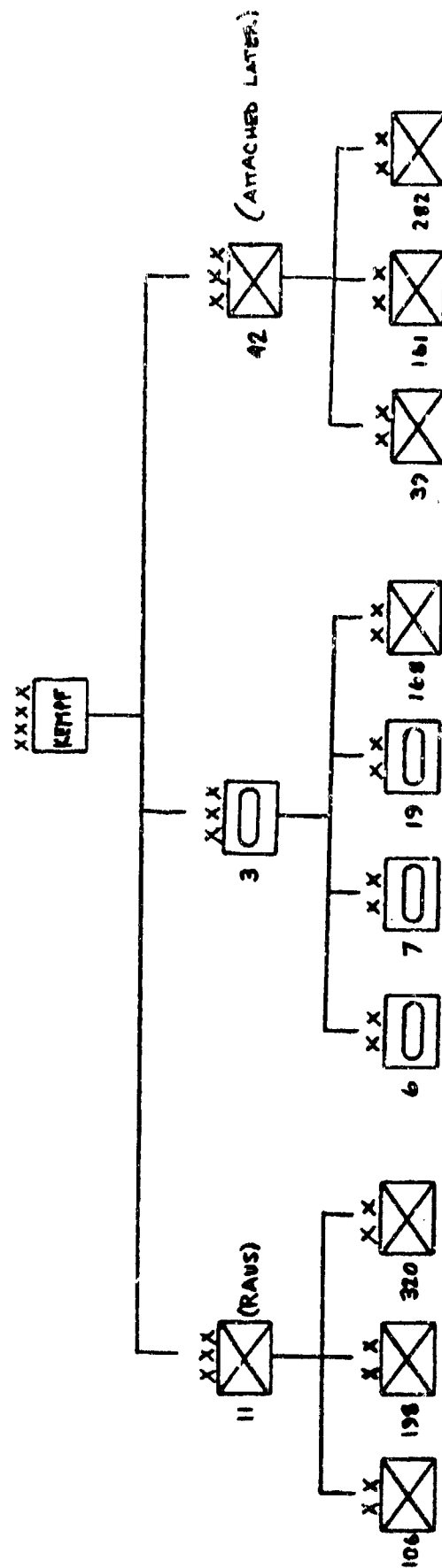
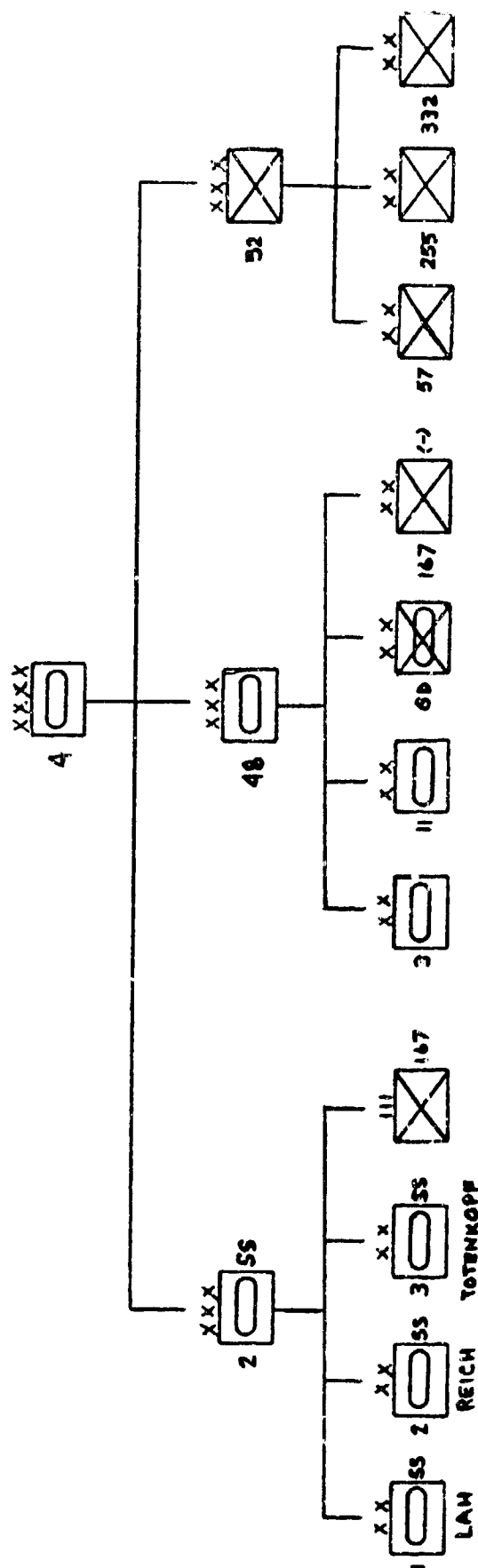
History is replete with victorious examples of armies extracting the wrong lessons from successful wars. To prevent the U. S. from doing the same, it is imperative the U.S. Army study Soviet military history and attempt to ascertain what guides our Soviet counterparts in their doctrinal development.





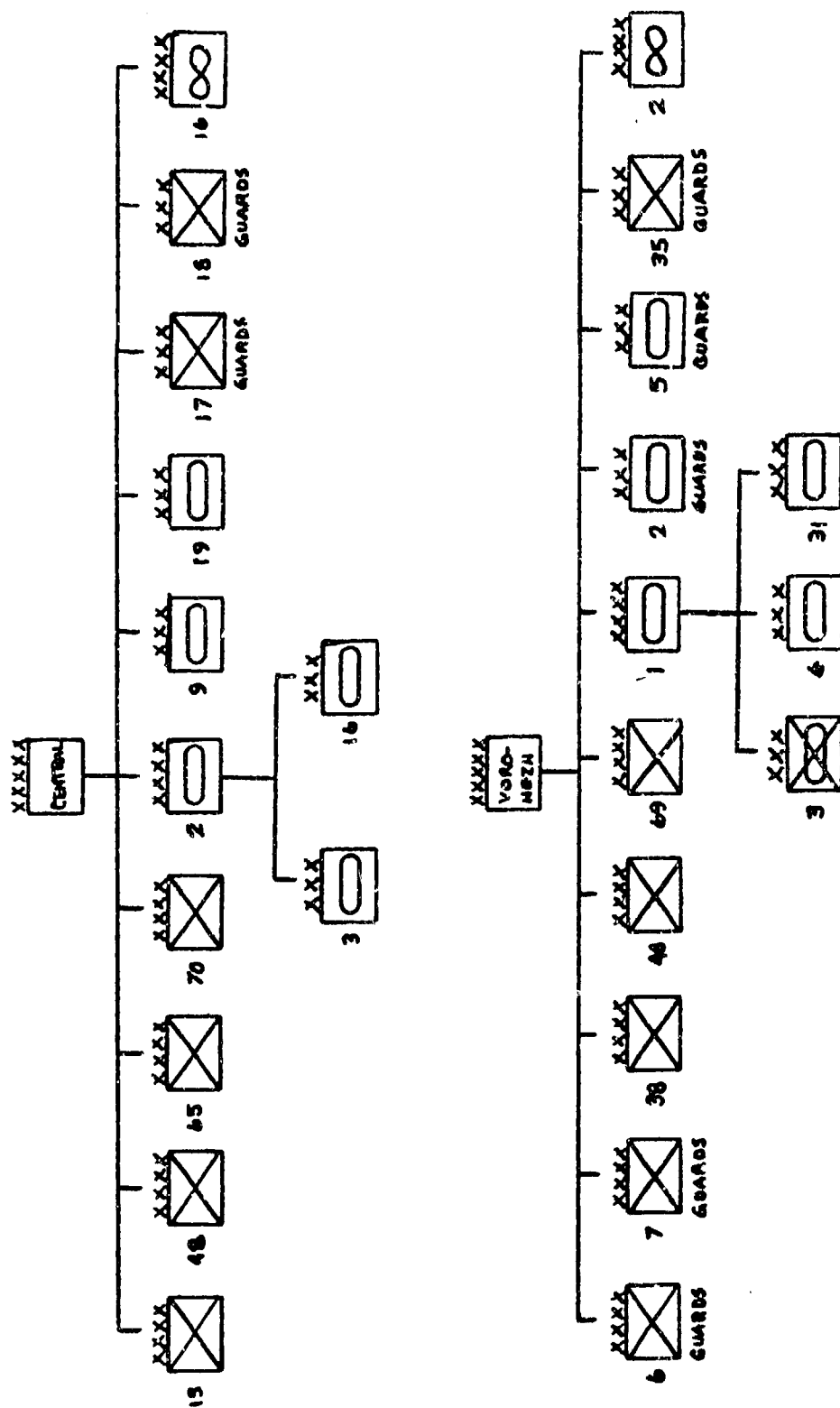
NINTH ARMY ORGANIZATION

APPENDIX A



ARMY GROUP SOUTH ORGANIZATION

APPENDIX B



# CENTRAL AND VORONEZH FRONTS ORGANIZATION

APPENDIX C

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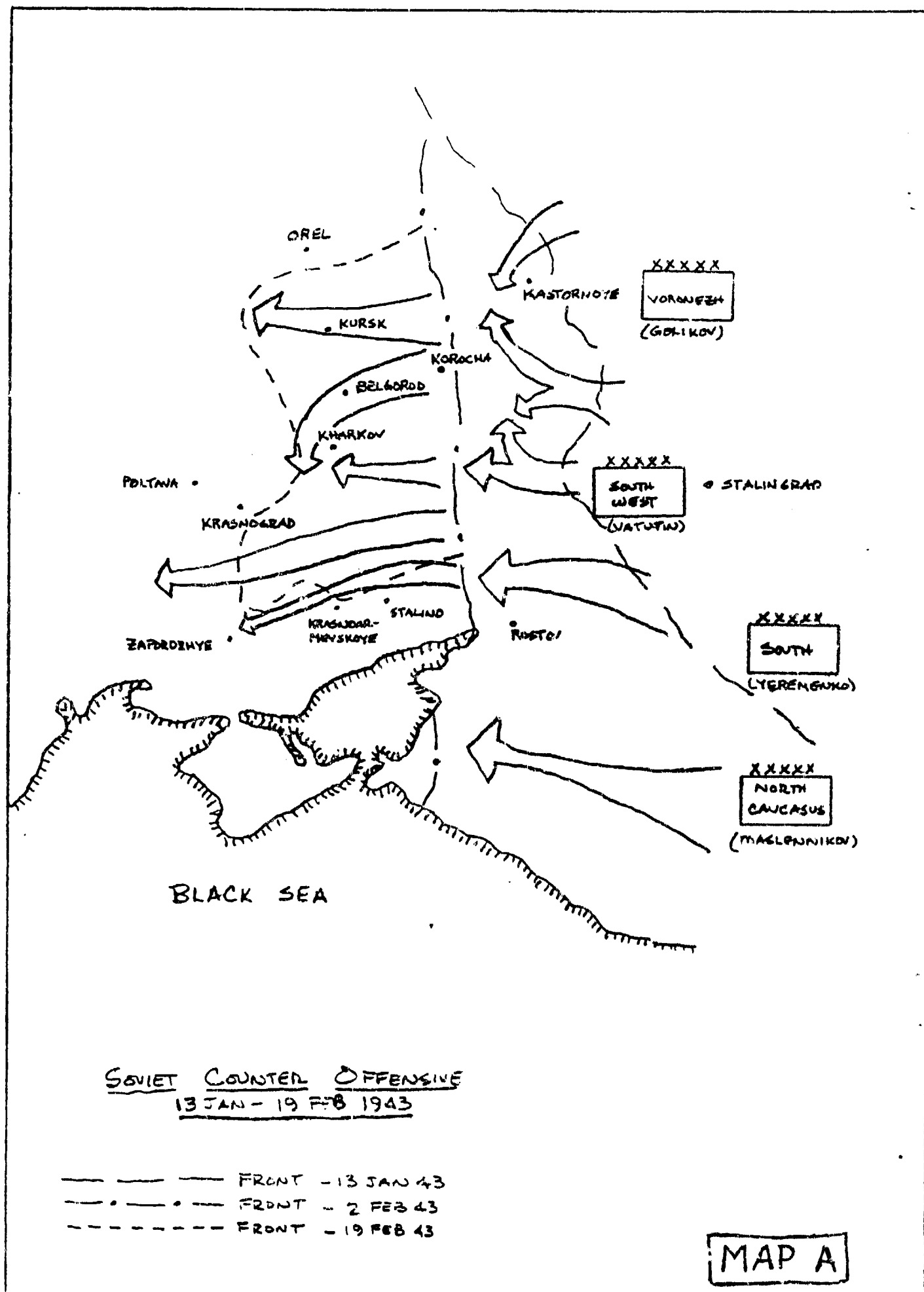
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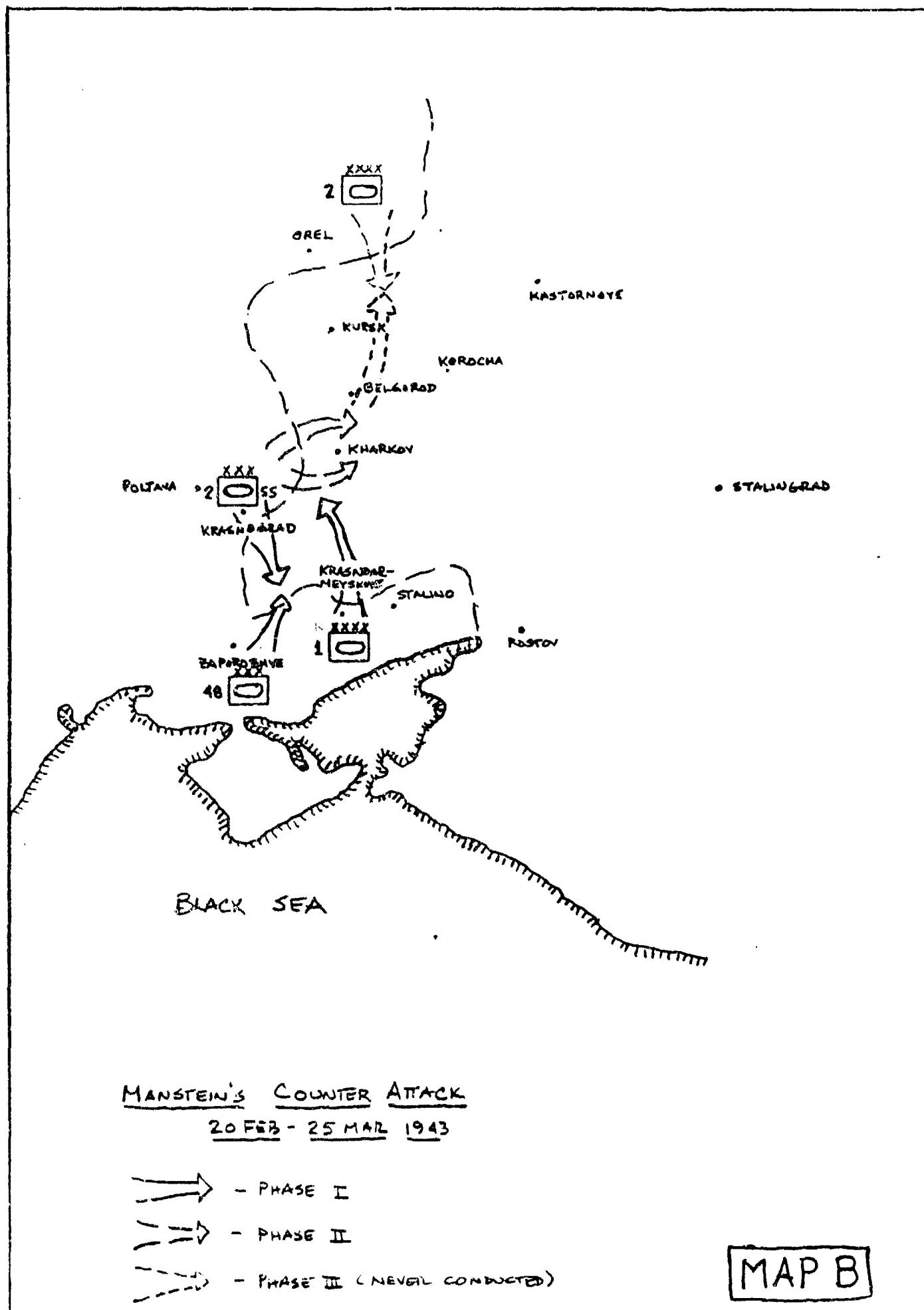
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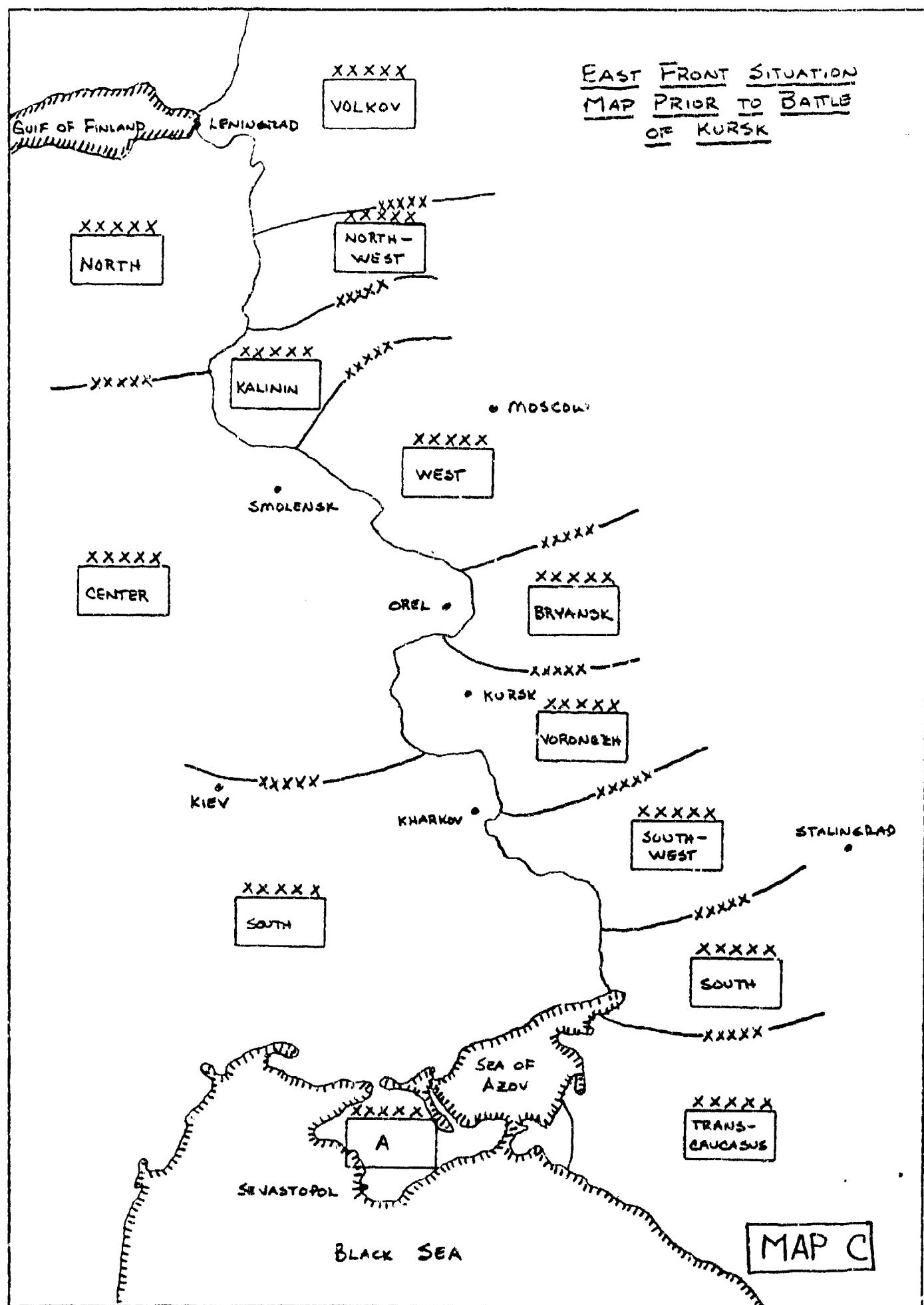
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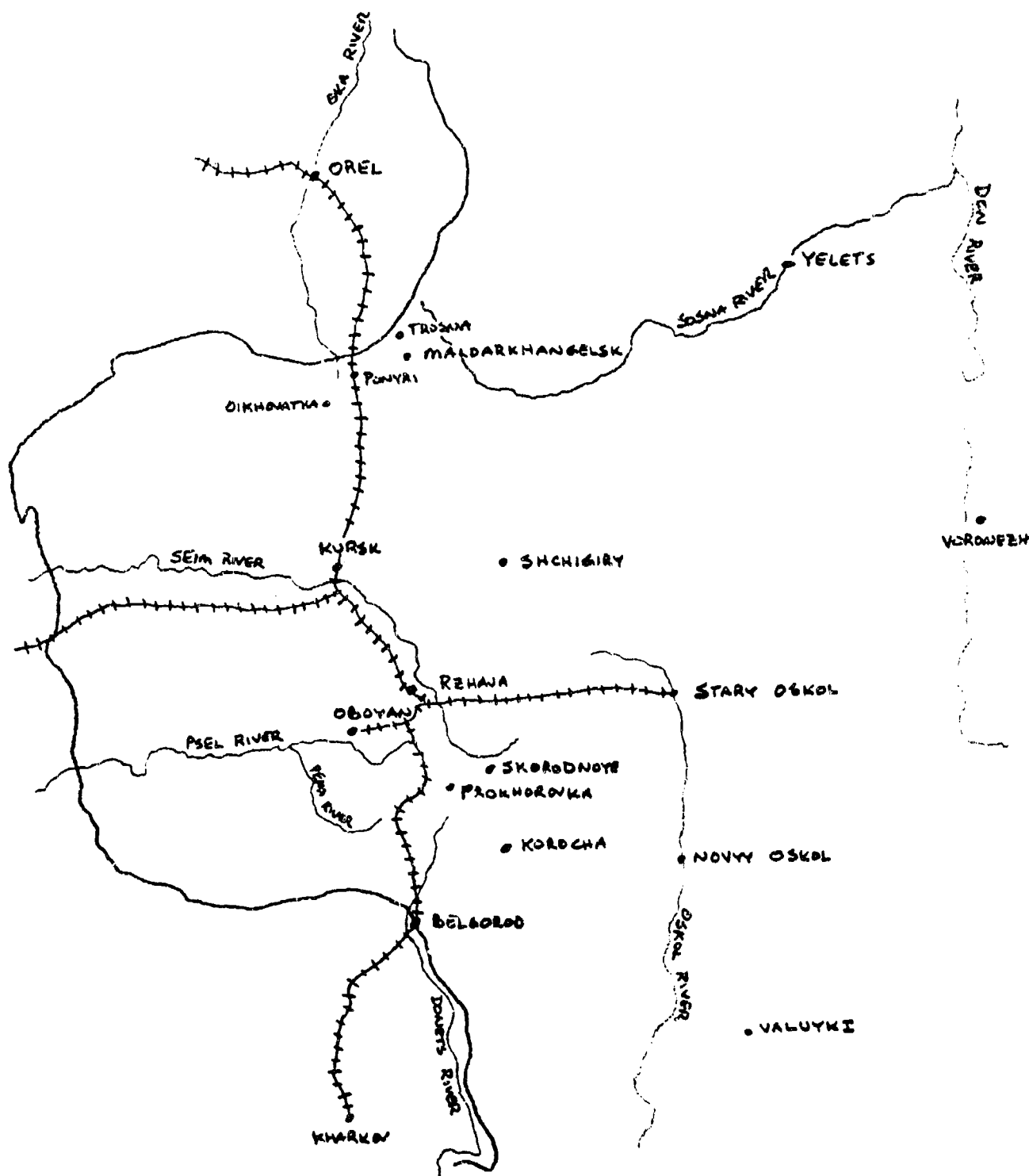






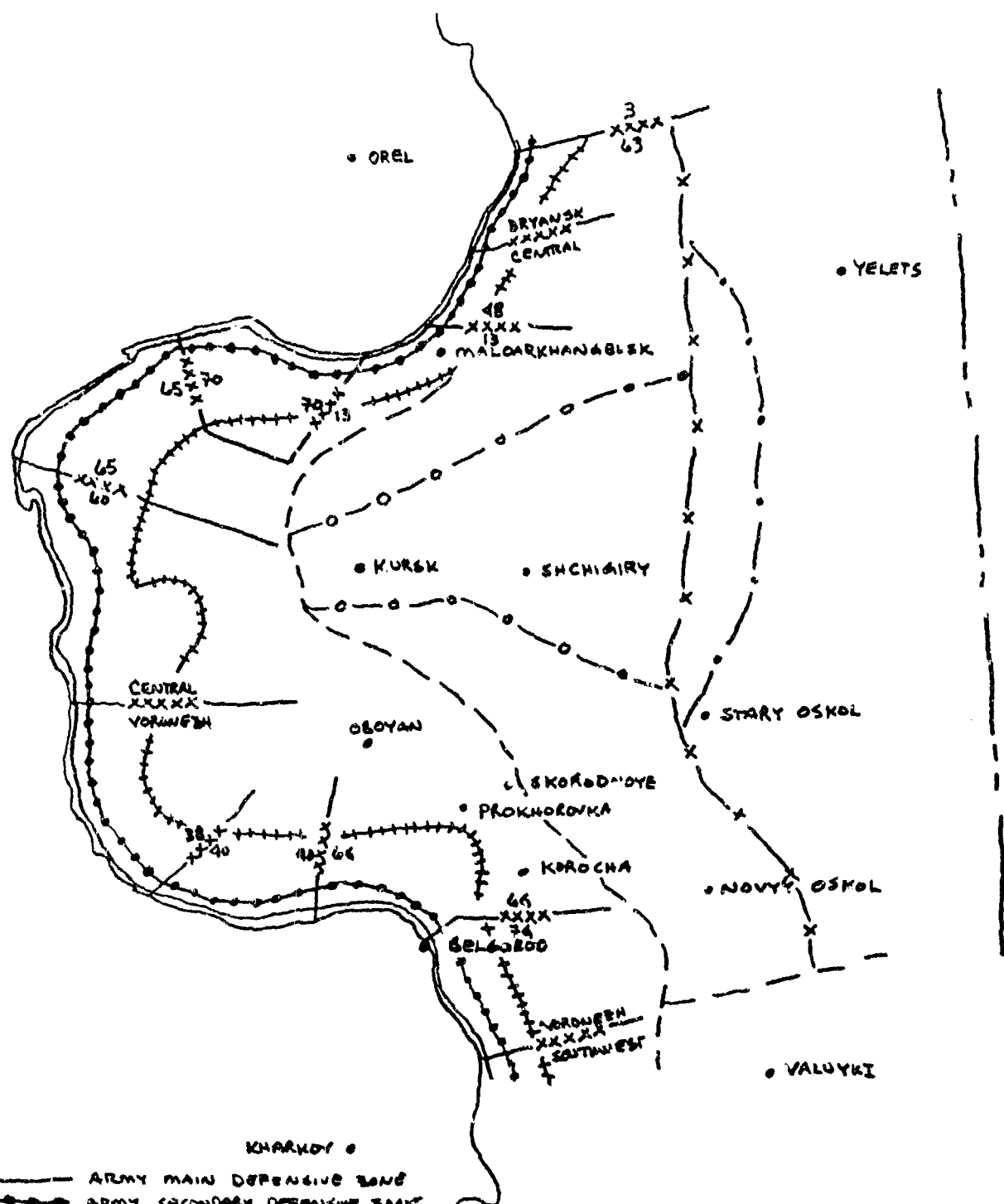
# THE KURSK SALIENT

JULY 1943



MAP D

SOVIET ARMY DISPOSITION  
AND DEFENSIVE LINES

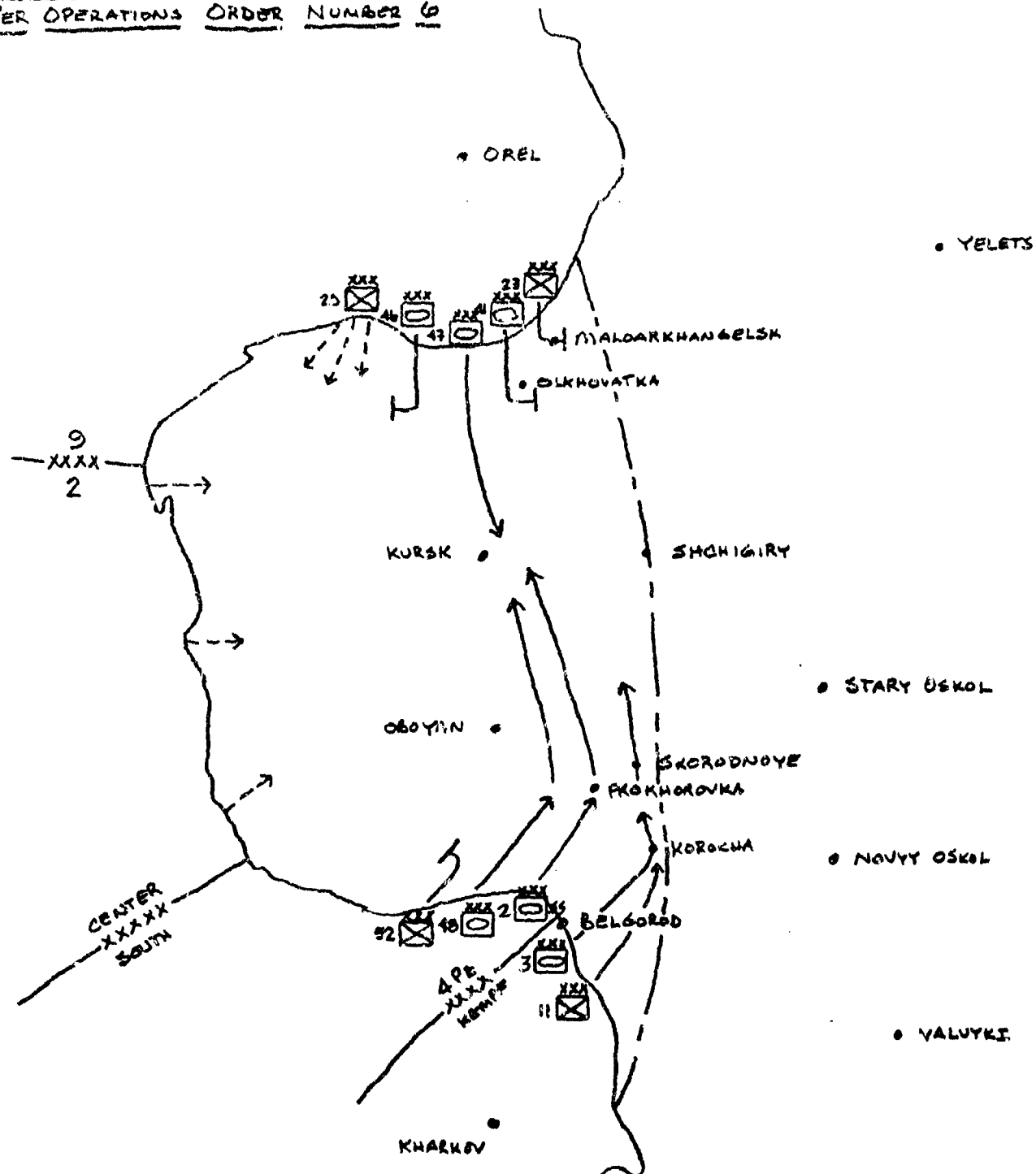


KHARKOV •

- ARMY MAIN DEFENSIVE ZONE
- ARMY SECONDARY DEFENSIVE ZONE
- +++++ ARMY THIRD (ROAD) DEFENSIVE ZONE
- FRONT FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE
- o-o- FRONT SECOND LINE OF DEFENSE
- x-x- FRONT THIRD LINE OF DEFENSE
- STEPPE FRONT DEFENSIVE LINE
- STRATEGIC LINE OF DEFENSE

MAP E

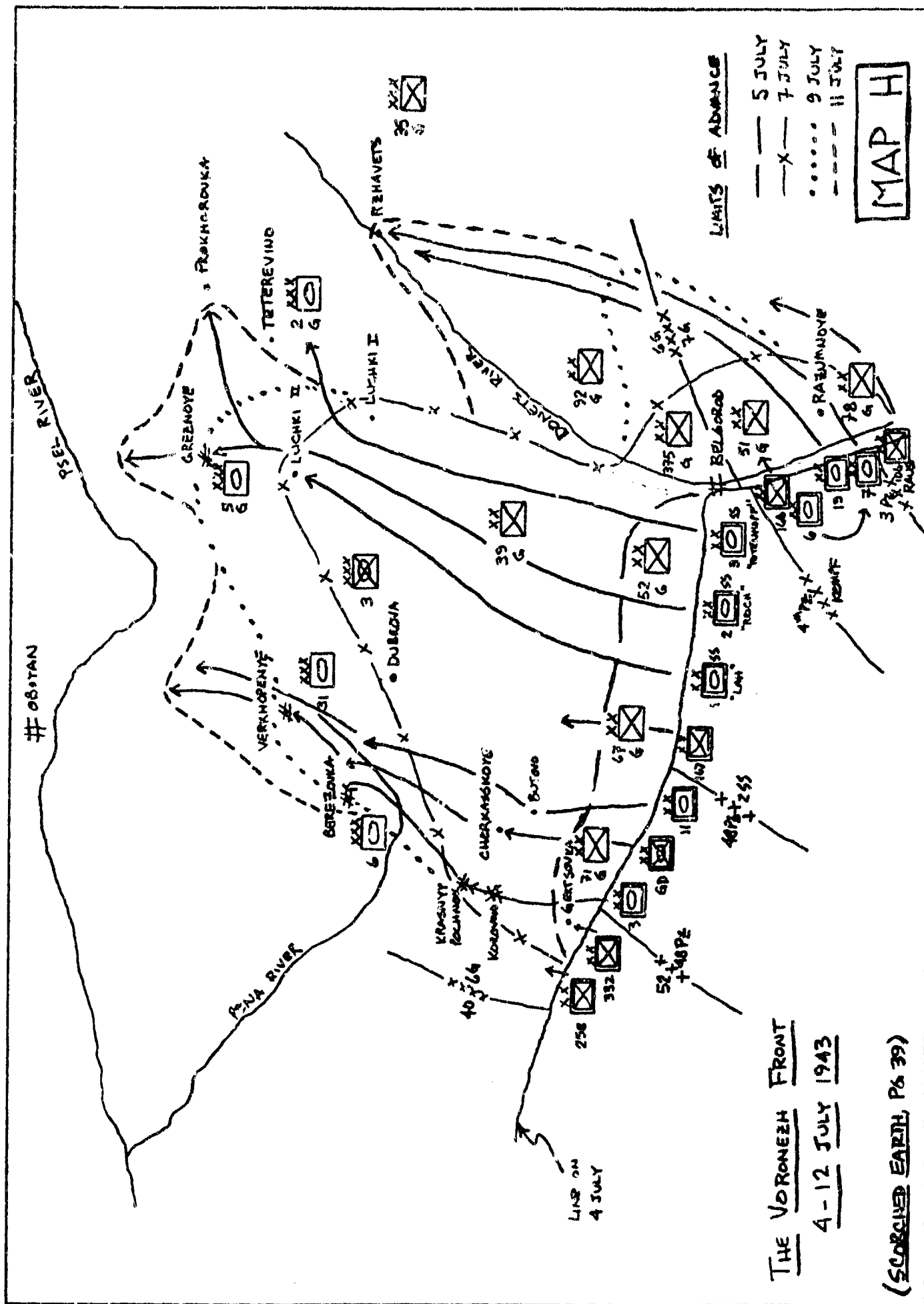
GERMAN UNIT MISSIONS AND NEW  
DEFENSIVE LINE TO BE ESTABLISHED  
PER OPERATIONS ORDER NUMBER 6



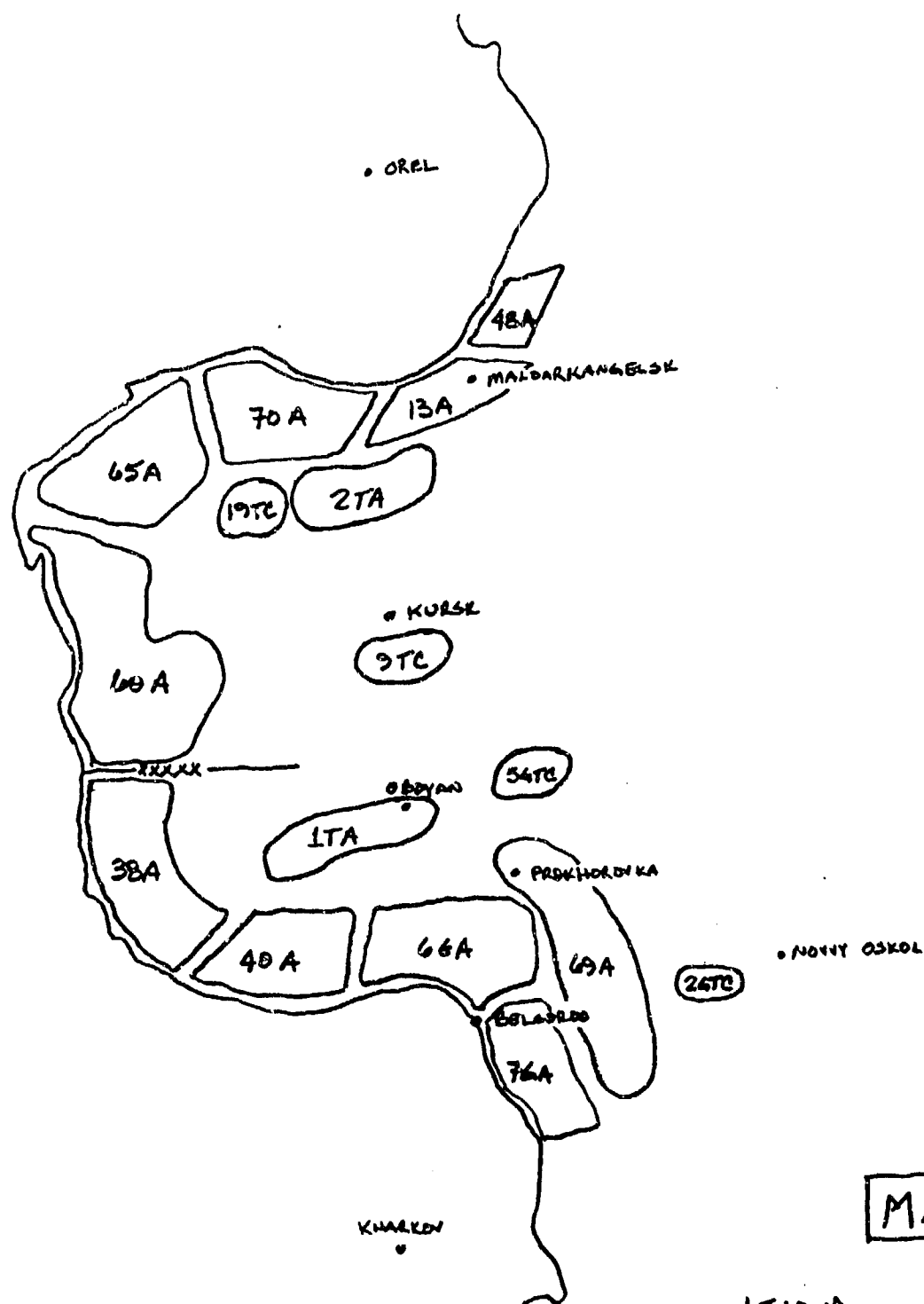
————— INITIAL UNIT MISSIONS  
 - - - - - MISSIONS FOLLOWING ENCIRCLEMENT  
 - . - . - NEW DEFENSIVE LINE

MAP F





SOVIET OPERATIONAL  
FORMATIONS  
KURSK JULY 1943



**MAP I**

LEGEND

- A - ARMY
- GA - GUARDS ARMY
- TA - TANK ARMY
- TC - TANK CORPS
- GTC - GUARDS TANK CORPS

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